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HE HEARD MOVEMENTS ON THE STAIRS.

THE FIVE POINTS Lodging-House Janitor; OR, Monk Merry's Italian Bouncers.

A Story of The Prodigy of Paradise Park.

BY JO PIERCE.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRODIGY AND HIS PECULIAR BUSINESS.

A RAGGED man and a ragged boy passed along a narrow street and emerged into a small square. The locality was one with a history well-known to nearly every one in New York, but the boy gazed around in curiosity.

He saw a number of brick buildings, more or less imposing in point of size, but all of rusty and decayed appearance.

In the center of the little square was a still smaller inclosure, which marked a praiseworthy,

but difficult, attempt to make a park. It was but little larger than a good-sized dog-house.

"What place is this?" the boy asked, timidly.

The ragged man smiled quietly.

"This here is the Five P'int's," he explained.

"Thar was a time, George Washington, when this here was the abode an' boudoir of heaps o' fun. When I's a boy the Five P'int's was as skittish as a sorrel colt in pasture. Still, it had its drawbacks. I admit that it wa'n't so law-abidin' as parsons would hev it. That was long ago, George Washington, an' fellanthropy has lifted it from the social mire inter which *you* might 'a' fell ef I hadn't been yer guardeen angel. See?"

"Yes sir."

"Sartain! Of course yer do. Nobody ever accused you o' bein' ungrateful. You be grateful!"

"Yes, Mr. Merry."

The boy answered readily, but with a faintness of tone which would have suggested to a close observer and hearer that he was not enthusiastic in his gratitude.

"That thar funny little pen in the middle o' this square," pursued the man, "is called Paradise Park. Huh! huh! did yer ever hear sech an absurd thing?"

The ragged man seemed to be very jolly in his way, and he broke into a series of chuckles.

"It's small," observed the boy, doubtfully.

"So it is, George Washington. If a canary-bird had a cage o' that size he would pine away fur want of exercise; but, land love yer! the little park is a blessin', all the same. The Sixt' Ward would be lost without it. But, this ain't ter the p'int. We want ter get a night's lodgin'. Come on, George Washington!"

Holding fast to the boy's hand, Mr. Merry turned into Elm street and went on until he came to a large, weather-beaten old building upon which a sign, erratically printed, announced that lodging could be obtained for twenty cents a night.

"That's the place," he added, with an air of satisfaction; "an' a right good place it is, too. Twenty cents, George Washington! I don't take yer to no ten or fifteen-cent den. This hyer is tony, an' you ought ter be grateful. You be grateful, ain't yer?"

He gave the boy a sharp glance which indicated considerable doubt, but again received a faint affirmative.

They entered the building, the door being open to all.

Neither had ever been there before, but the place had been described to the man, and he went confidently up a flight of rickety, warped stairs and, reaching the floor above, entered a room at the right.

It proved to be an extremely long room, but not very wide, and was very suggestive of a horse-stable. All along one side extended a row of little inclosures just about like stalls, except that they had doors.

The unoccupied space was almost destitute of furniture, but a boy was sitting on a stool, and he rose and looked at the new-comers in an inquiring way.

He was a queer-looking boy—at least, so the man thought.

His age might have been anywhere from twelve to sixteen, but he was a light-weight. He had a narrow chest; slender arms and legs; small hands and feet, and a very thin face.

Merry had never before seen such a slender boy. If he had not possessed a big supply of black, curling hair he would have been, the man thought, almost invisible.

Despite all this, the boy was not of delicate appearance. He was straight of figure, had good color in his face, was bright-eyed, and appeared to have considerable muscle for one of his years.

"Wal, what is it?" he asked, calmly, as Merry remained silent.

"I was lookin' at you!"

"I see you was."

"Whar'd they git you?"

"Over at Paradise Park," was the matter-of-fact answer.

"Be you a cherub?"

"Come off!" calmly directed the thin boy.

"Be you hyar on biz?"

"Kin you cast a shadder?"

"You've noticed it, hev you?"

"Noticed w'ot?"

"That I'm thin."

"Thin! Why, a sheet o' paper ain't no comparison."

"That's my way," the boy explained, with calm melancholy. "No matter how much I

eat, it don't do no good; I can't git fat. It's as hopeless as ef I was a knife-blade. They calls me Cobwebs!"

"They do right, by thunder!"

"But that ain't my name. It's Jehiel Kellar, an' some calls me Curly Kell."

"Ain't got no more names, hev yer?"

"I ain't afraid ter tell them all; some folks be!"

This was a shot at the new-comer, which he did not fail to understand.

"It's all right, Cobwebs; we can't all be fat. Whar's the boss?"

"I'm him."

"You be? You don't run this place?"

"No; but I'm janitor. Want lodgin's?"

"We do."

"Forty cents!"

Curly Kell spoke with business gravity. He was always grave. There were times when he used slang and indulged in light conversation of an original nature, but nothing ever disturbed his calm dignity.

The money was paid, and then the man looked around.

"Got a register?"

"A what?"

"Book ter write our names in."

"W'ot yer givin' us? Take this fur the Fift' Avenoo Hotel? Ef you git a bed you ought ter be thankful."

"Presume that's so, though I ginerally like ter register. Ef I should git smothered by gas, my wife an' chillun could identify me by the register. My name is Monk Merry; this hyar youth is George Washington Franklin."

"Them p'int's don't concern me."

Curly Kell walked to one of the doors and opened it. Inside there was an apology for a bed, loosely constructed by some one not an expert at carpentering, and this was covered with a very small stock of bedding.

Towels, soap and water were not to be seen anywhere about the place, but this was a deprivation which its usual patrons had never noticed. Water they had no use for, externally or internally.

The so-called rooms continued to look like horse-stalls. Between them, partitions of rough boards were run up about seven feet. Except for this, and the doors, they were without any degree of privacy.

Monk Merry surveyed them with grim humor. "Elegant lay-out!"

"You bet!" affirmed Cobwebs, proudly. "It would be hard to find the equal in New York. We don't keep no fifteen-cent lodging-houses, an' hev our beds right up smack ter each other, like a hospital. We charge extra price, an' give superior comodations."

"Zackly! Jes' so! Precisely!"

Ragged and ill-looking as he was, Merry had a clear understanding of the affairs of life. Perhaps he had slept in really respectable quarters in his day; certainly, he was amused at this attempt at exclusiveness.

The unfinished boards had once had divers knot-holes and crevices which seriously infringed upon privacy, but strips of newspaper had been pasted on to hide the defect.

It was comical, and Merry realized it.

"Who keeps the place?" he asked.

"Mahalaleel Tubbs."

"Mother o' yours?"

"He's a man."

"Oh! Didn't know by the name but he was a kangaroo. Ma-ha-la-le-el! Pooty good, b' mighty! An' your name is—what?"

"Jehiel—"

"Reg'lar fam'ly name!"

"Mahalaleel ain't none relate. ter me; I'm only his janitor. I hev charge when he's away. Be you goin' ter take quarters, or not?"

Cobwebs was none too well impressed with Mr. Monk Merry, and was growing impatient at the delay. He liked customers who paid their money without a word, went to bed, and had nothing to say until morning.

"Why, cert.; that's what we're hyar fur. Here is yer forty. It's a pile o' money; it costs amazin' ter live in New York. George Washington, you go ter bed, an' I'll join ye presently."

The small boy obeyed all that Merry said without opposition, but in a manner that indicated no great amount of affection between his companion and himself. In fact, taken in connection with the former's oft-repeated inquiry as to whether the boy was "grateful," it looked as if the bond between them was of the most fragile kind.

When George had gone to bed, Merry followed Cobwebs out into the main room.

"Kin I smoke?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Got a good job here, ain't yer?"

"Yes."

"Live round here previous?"

"Always nigh here."

The janitor had been making the briefest of replies, evincing a lack of inclination to talk, but the turn of affairs aroused a kind of gloomy enthusiasm within him, and he suddenly grew communicative and added:

"I was born in the Sixt' Ward; don't jestly know whar, fur I was a-floatin' at my earliest rec'lections. Ef I ever git ter be President, nobody can't have my birthplace photographed an' put in the papers. I grew up in Paradise Park. Ef ever a feller had a home, that place was mine. I used ter go thar an' play, an' loaf, an' roll around, an' git the mud all over me. Until I was nine or ten years old I used ter carry Five P'int's mud on me all the time, one layer above the other. Then I took ter bathin' in the river, an' it ain't so no more."

Cobwebs sighed, as if he regretted the days past and gone, and Mr. Monk Merry echoed the sound.

"Water is dangerous!" declared the latter.

"It's fashionable, though."

"Not in the best sossiety."

"I thought it was," observed the janitor, doubtfully.

"No."

"Don't they use it on Murray Hill?"

"Pah! Call that the best sossiety?"

"Some does."

"I don't. They hev clothes on Murray Hill that is gorgeous, but brains—why, they ain't got hardly none! I know, 'cause I've mixed with them a good 'eal. Yes; they wash—scrub themselves so much that they take all the dirt off, an' is white as wax figgers."

"You don't approve of it?"

"I don't!" asserted Merry, stoutly.

The janitor meditated deeply on what he regarded as an intricate point for several moments, and then replied:

"Ef I've done wrong by takin' ter the use o' soap an' water I ain't ter blame; 'twas 'cause I've been wrongly teached. But that ain't w'ot I set out ter say. I grew up in the streets at the Five P'int's, but, while I was growin' up, I forgot ter grow sideways. I was the thinnest specimen of humanity ever seen around there, an' folks got ter callin' me 'Cobwebs, the Prodigy of Paradise Park!'"

"Why 'Prodigy'?"

"'Cause I's so thin."

"I see."

"I got guyed a good 'eal, an' it used ter make me feel sort o' mean, but I finally got the good will o' most of the fellers. They ginerally call me Curly Kell, now."

"You manage ter stagger under 'em, don't yer?"

"Don't mind 'em an' artom now," responded Jehiel. "I've got inter business, an' when a chap is that way, he ain't got time ter think what his name is. I'm glad I ain't got a dude name, though. Here comes another lodger."

CHAPTER II.

MYSTERIOUS MEN AT THE HAPPY HAVEN.

MONK MERRY rose quickly and closed the door of the little den where the boy, George Washington, was lying.

"He'll go ter sleep quicker," Monk explained.

Curly Kell had turned to greet the new-comer, whose footsteps he had heard outside, and he did not give much attention to Monk and his actions.

A closer observer might have suspected that the latter wished to keep all prying eyes away from George Washington, and this, and other facts suggested that he had something in connection with the boy which he wished to hide, as well as to hide his face.

It was then the time at which the patrons of the lodging-house usually began to come in, and Cobwebs had more or less business from that time.

Merry sat at one side and watched quietly. His manner was phlegmatic, and he pulled away at his old clay pipe in a satisfied way, but he did not fail to look sharply at each person who entered.

The fact was, while he did not expect to see any one he knew, he was aware that he might see some one he had cause to fear.

His life had always been one with pages he did not care to have every one read, and times had not changed with him.

At last he grew sleepy, and, after yawning, announced that he would retire. This did not interest Cobwebs. He had business to attend to,

and his mind was all on it. He was not a boy to be puffed up by any real or imaginary honor, but, having a strong business sense, he was as earnest in the care of the twenty-cent lodging-house as though it had been a marble-front hotel on some aristocratic street.

Monk Merry went into the compartment with George Washington, and had no more to say.

Cobwebs had taken in several lodgers, but there came a lull in business which was broken by the entrance of a swarthy-faced, black-haired man, who bore all the distinguishing marks of a foreigner.

He was dressed in garments once of very good quality, but grown seedy with age and use, and had a face above the lodging-house average in point of refinement and intelligence; but it bore a peculiar expression.

It was one with a certain wildness; an uneasy, restless expression; and a close observer would have thought: "This man is afraid of something or some one."

Curly Kell noticed the fact at once, but it made no impression upon him. All sorts and conditions of men came to the place to sleep. Some had guilty secrets; some even had been arrested there, charged with grave crimes.

The Prodigy had reason to believe that every crime and misdemeanor known to man had been represented by those who slept under the roof. With these facts he had nothing to do. As long as they behaved well in the place, he could ask no more.

In a twenty-cent lodging-house one cannot be too fastidious.

The stranger looked around the room for some time before he found words, and when he did, they were spoken hesitatingly.

"This—a—is a—hotel?" he questioned.

Curly Kell rubbed his sharp chin doubtfully.

"Wal, yes," he returned.

"You keep ze public?"

"We bunk 'em."

"Zis ees what you call lodging-house?"

"Jes' so. Want a bed?"

"Ze place is quiet?"

"Oh! cert.; as you kin see."

The man's roving gaze caught sight of a sign painted on the wall.

"Happy Haven!" he read. "V'at zat means?"

"It's the name of our select 'stablishment. The same name is ter be seen at the door."

"I saw it, but I do not know ze meaning of all things I see."

"You're French."

"Eh?"

The man gave a start, and looked at Cobwebs with sudden trepidation.

"I say, you're a Frenchman."

"How you know zat?"

"By the way you talk."

"No, no; you make von meestake; von grand meestake. I am an American!" declared the stranger, earnestly.

"All right; we don't care here ef a man is a Choctaw, ef he behaves well. Hev a bed?"

"Zis will all be private?"

"Bless you, yes!"

Cobwebs was getting a trifle impatient. He was not accustomed to applicants who were fastidious. The greater part cared nothing for their surroundings, as long as they found a place whereon to lay their heads.

There was one person in the room who manifestly had more interest in the Frenchman than the janitor did. Not long had the new-comer been talking when Mr. Monk Merry's head appeared above the partition which shut him in, and his gaze became glued upon the latest applicant.

Merry said nothing, but his expression spoke volumes. There was surprise, eagerness and rapt attention in it, and, had he been seen, the impression would have been unavoidable that he had seen the Frenchman before.

Yet, he did not greet him as a friend; instead, he lowered his head, after a little, until his gleaming, cunning eyes were barely above the top of the partition.

He listened breathlessly to what was said.

The stranger did not grow more at ease. Once more he began to take an optical inventory of the place. Monk Merry's head sunk out of sight.

"Can I look in ze other compartments?" asked the foreigner.

"Wal, I reckon not!" Curly Kell retorted.

"Why in thunder should you look in?"

"To see who is zere."

"What do you care who's there?"

"Nothings! nothings!" was the hurried response. "Of course I care nothings. I will—I think I will—I will take ze one place here."

There was nothing amusing in his hesitating manner. Heshowed painful weakness and fear, and, intent on business as Cobwebs was, he could not but notice and mentally comment upon it.

"He's done some crime, and now he's pretty nigh skeered out o' his shoes. He's a hunted man!"

The fact that the janitor thought thus did not interfere with the bargain under way. The proprietor of the Happy Haven never refused any one who could pay his bills, and would behave himself, and Kell, acting for him, did not even feel curious in this case.

Having grown up in the midst of poverty and crime—from which, luckily, he had thus far kept himself free—the boy had a vague idea that all men were criminals, but had never meditated very deeply on the point.

A compartment was assigned to the Frenchman, and he entered it.

"Zere ees no lock on ze door," he complained.

"W'ot d'ye expect? Want a Turkish bath an' a steam reddiator? You can't git 'em here; this ain't Fift' Avenue."

"But zere is no privacy!"

Another customer entered the main room, and Cobwebs went to attend to him. It dawned upon the Frenchman's mind that he would have to take things as they were or leave the Happy Haven, so he sighed and prepared to remain.

The fact was, he had sought this place because he thought it would be very retired, and that certain persons would not think of looking for him there; and this impression was so strong that he decided to run the risk of an unlocked door.

He had no valuables to lose.

Having paid Cobwebs, he closed the door and removed his coat. This was all the disrobing that many patrons of the Happy Haven ever allowed themselves to do, though unusual to him.

He covertly brought a revolver out of his pocket, looking stealthily around, slipped it under his pillow, and then lay down.

It was five minutes later when a feeble voice sounded in the compartment devoted to the use of Monk Merry and his boy companion. The latter had observed Monk's conduct in looking over the partition with some wonder, but had made no comment upon it.

"I would like a drink of water," remarked the lad.

"Eh? What's that?" demanded Merry, with a start.

The statement was repeated.

"Nonsense!" returned Monk. "You don't want nothin' of the kind. Besides, thar ain't no water here."

"But there must be some outside."

"I'm sleepy, an' can't go fur none."

"But I'll go."

"No, you won't!" exclaimed Merry, hastily.

"You come in here ter sleep, not ter swill down water. Water! Pah!—you git in the habit o' drinkin' too much water an' it'll kill yer! You let the stuff alone. You hadn't ought ter think o' water when I've pervided sech a good bed fur yer. Ain't yer grateful?"

"Yes," answered George Washington, faintly.

"Then say no more about water!"

Mr. Merry's verbosity over such a trifling affair might have puzzled a casual hearer, while a more attentive person, remembering the start he had made when the boy spoke of leaving the compartment, would have arrived at the conclusion that the ragged man was afraid to have George, or himself, leave their cover.

Ever since the alleged Frenchman entered the room, Monk had been in a flurry, and he did not get over it easily.

George was afraid of his companion, and so he abandoned the hope of satisfying his thirst, but the water-hating Merry did not lie down. Instead, he remained on his feet, and his expression was troubled and thoughtful. Now that the Frenchman was in the Happy Haven, he wished himself and George far away.

If he had known of any way to get out secretly he would have made use of it; but, having acted the spy himself, he was afraid that the other man would do the same.

He was determined that he and George should not leave the compartment until the Frenchman had departed from the lodging-house.

Little suspecting what adverse elements he had taken into his place of business, Cobwebs continued his work. He took in the usual hybrid class of customers, some of whom were much the worse for liquor. He showed the dex-

terity of long practice in getting these men to bed, and did it all calmly.

The Happy Haven turned no one away, and scorned no one.

The compartments were getting nearly all monopolized when there came a knock at the door which led into the hall. As this door had a placard outside which briefly directed applicants to "Come in!" such a thing was unusual.

Cobwebs opened the door.

A lady stood outside!

The janitor started. Nothing of the kind had ever occurred before in his experience.

"We don't take women!" he explained, hastily.

"All rules have an exception," she calmly answered; "you will take me!"

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN APPEARS.

CURLY KELL looked badly demoralized.

"But, mum," he urged, "this her place is exclusive fur men, an' we ain't got no private rooms—"

The woman made an imperious gesture.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "Do you think I want sleeping accommodations? When I do I shall not seek an old rookery like this."

"Oh!"

Kell breathed a sigh of relief. He could afford to overlook the disparaging term applied to the Happy Haven as long as the woman did not intend to urge the point.

"Where is the proprietor?" she continued.

"I'm him."

"You!"

"Leastways, I act fur him. He ain't in now, an' won't be ter-night."

"What is the extent of your premises?"

"The which?"

"Have you more than one room?"

"Oh, yes; there's the boss's cobblin'-shop, an' his own sleepin'-room."

"Where is the latter?"

"That's the door to it."

"Let me in!"

"Great cats! I couldn't do that!"

"Why not?"

"He would chew my ear off."

"Read that!"

The woman, whose manner was abrupt, imperious and severe, flopped a soiled sheet of note-paper almost into Kell's face. He took it, and, finding a single line of writing, read it slowly:

"Let the bearer occupy my room, to-night."

To this was signed the name of Kell's employer.

The boy rubbed his sharp chin and looked doubtful. Never having seen his employer's writing he could not say whether the present sample was genuine, but the whole affair impressed him as being as mysterious and suspicious as it was strange.

The woman waited impatiently, but in silence, and Cobwebs finally turned his gaze upon her searchingly. He saw a woman of about thirty-five years, tall, dark, fairly well dressed, and rather impressive of appearance. She looked out of place in the abode of poverty, but there was no womanly gentleness in her face to arouse the idea that she was too good to be there.

"Well?" she finally questioned, sharply.

"What's this go?" Kell asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you want that room for?"

"That is my business."

"Mine, too," was the stout reply.

"Do you defy your employer's orders?"

"I ain't sure this is his order."

"It speaks for itself."

"Yes; but does it speak fur him? Fact is, mum, this here is a go wholly out o' the ordinary. I can't see what in time you want that room for. It's a small, mean, stuffed-up place, with old shoes layin' around, an' none too clean—"

"You have only to show me in."

Kell looked at the paper again, and still hesitated. The mystery was not explained in the least, but he felt that he might as well refrain from asking the woman any more questions.

The only point was, should he let her in?

She suddenly concluded that something besides intimidation might be wise upon her part, and, producing her pocketbook, took out a dollar bill.

"This will repay you for your trouble," she observed, more graciously.

"Don't want yer money!"

"No?"

"No. Ef you've made a special bargain with the boss, he's the man ter look after the finances. The terms for the lodging-room is twenty cents a night. I never heerd that there was a price on t'other room. I won't take no money!"

Cobwebs spoke with vigor, bound to have his conscience free, anyhow. He could not very well refuse to obey the note, unless he knew it to be a forgery, and this he did not know.

"I trust, for *your* sake, you are not going to refuse to let me into the room," continued the woman, an angry glitter appearing in her eyes.

"I s'pose that's intended ter skeer me, but I don't skeer very bad. You kin hev the room. I only hope yer ain't puttin' up no job on the boss, fur he is pertic'lar p'izon when his mad is up. Yer name ain't on this codicil."

"Codicil? Oh! no; it's not on the paper. But I am Madame Hortense Lapierre."

"French!" thought the Prodigy. "So was t'other one. I'll be thrashed ef thar ain't a deluge o' sech."

Madame Lapierre was looking impatiently toward the small room, and she was kept waiting no longer. Cobwebs opened the door and lighted the gas.

He had not maligned the room. It was a small and ill-favored place, where but few ladies would wish even to sit down, but she surveyed it with an air of satisfaction.

"I kin get a broom an' shove out some o' the dirt fur ye—"

So spoke Kell, but she interrupted him.

"Nonsense! What is a little dust? All I want is to be left alone. Good-night!"

She seemed upon the point of trying to shove him out forcibly, but changed her mind and did nothing so rash. Reluctantly and unwillingly the janitor left the room, and the key at once clicked in the door. Madame Lapierre had made herself secure from intrusion.

Kell shook his head gravely.

"Can't get onter it. Whatever possesses that woman ter want a habitation in there is more nor I kin guess. She looks like she had some money, so why should she come here? Hope she won't smash around and disturb my lodgers. They're good, high-toned gents, an' them as ain't full would be kep' awake by a rumpus. That would be a shame!"

The janitor shook his head again as he considered how melancholy it would be if such eminent men should be annoyed.

"But the wall is thick between her room an' theirs, an' I reckon they won't hear her," he decided.

He reëntered the main room. All was quiet there, and the lodgers seemed to be oblivious of all around them, but only a few minutes had passed when the door of one apartment opened and the Frenchman came out.

His face bore the old, troubled expression, and he looked around nervously. Approaching Kell, he began to speak, and had said only a few words when Monk Merry's forehead and eyes appeared above the wall of his inclosure.

George Washington's guardian proceeded to listen eagerly.

"My young friend, did I give to you ze name which is mine?" asked the Frenchman.

"No. We never take names here."

"Mine is John Smith."

The ridiculous side of this claim, when the name was compared with the speaker's nationality, could not fail to impress itself upon Cobwebs, but his gravity was proof against all things.

"All right," he returned.

"Could you write ze name on ze door to my bed-place, young sir?"

"Great cats! why should I?"

"So zat any one who comes in may know zat I am not any one else."

"What would they care?"

"Zey might care much."

"You don't know the character o' this here house," Kell expostulated, with some warmth. "This is a bang-up, first-class 'stablishment, an' nobody don't meddle with nobody else. We don't keer whether folks is called Smith or Schmittgruber—not a fraction. Write yer name on the door? Nary time; 'twould be ag'in' all rools an' precedents. Can't do it! You'd better turn in, mister; the night-air is gettin' raw, an' bleak."

Monsieur John Smith yielded meekly, but he sighed as he turned away. Plainly, his mind was ill at ease.

When he disappeared in his own quarters Mr. Monk Merry's prying head went out of sight, too, but its owner shook his shaggy locks gravely.

"The old chap is up ter some game!" he mut-

tered. "I can't for the life o' me guess what, but I'm afeerd he is on ter me!"

Cobwebs was not given time to think upon the peculiarities of Monsieur Smith. Two more customers arrived, and it needed only one glance for the Prodigy to see that they were Italians. This was not at all strange; all nations had been represented at the Happy Haven, and the coming of a Turk would not have surprised Kell.

The new-comers stopped and looked curiously around the long room.

"Want 'commodations?" Kell asked, briskly. "Yes," one of the twain answered, mechanically, but in quite good English.

"All right. Will you go in tergether?"

The man ceased to look around so inquisitively and, turning his gaze upon the janitor, spoke in a low voice:

"You have many patrons, eh?"

"Heaps!"

"They all in now, eh?"

"Can't say. They call at all hours."

"How many come this night, eh?"

"Oh! upwards of a dozen, I reckon."

The questioner stood in silence, but, once more his gaze traveled inquisitively along the room. It was as though he sought to learn more than he knew, and he hesitated to put in words what was in his mind.

His companion, who, evidently, was less intelligent, was outdoing him in the matter of peering about.

Sharply as they looked, there was one thing they did not see. The moment they entered the room the door to Monsieur Smith's compartment had been pushed ajar just the slightest fraction, and that man had looked out nervously.

The first view of them threw him into a panic. His face became white, and his legs shook under him until it seemed as if he would fall.

"*Mon Dieu!* I am lost!" he gasped, in a whisper.

And there at the crevice he stood, watching with undiminished terror until Cobwebs grew weary of the delay and brought the Italians to the point with a few business-like words. They paid for their lodging, and he conducted them directly toward Smith's covert.

Then the latter fled to his bed, crawled into it, drew up the clothes and covered his head. He left one little place open so that he could listen, and heard the Italians enter the compartment next to his own.

Profuse perspiration broke out upon him. He feared these men with an overwhelming fear, and now they were given quarters with only a low partition between them and himself.

The bed trembled under his shaking form.

It was not light enough in the compartment to distinguish faces, but he did not uncover his own. He kept the small opening free, however, and gazed at the top of the partition in the fascination of deadly fear.

His apprehensions were not without foundation. There were soft whispers in the Italians' quarter; then a lull; and then he saw a human head rise above the partition.

CHAPTER IV.

MONK MERRY IS STARTLED.

WORDS can but feebly describe the Frenchman's terror at that moment. He shrunk away as if he would go down through the bed, but never removed his gaze from the head above the partition.

He could watch in safety through the little crevice he had left in the bedclothes, for the darkness defied the spy's own gaze, but Monsieur "Smith" did not realize this. He expected instant detection and destruction. If he had thought of it he would have dropped the clothes wholly, but he was fascinated by the head above him.

Once he remembered the revolver under his own pillow, but he dared not use it.

It seemed a generation to the frightened man that the head remained in view, but, really, it was only a short time. Failing to see anything whatever, the prying Italian withdrew and stepped down to the floor of his own compartment.

Smith had a reprieve, but it did him no good. It merely gave him a chance to think actively, if not reasonably.

He had seen the two Italians before, and, though not acquainted with them, had no doubt as to the errand that had brought them to the Happy Haven. He fully believed that they had come to murder him. That they knew he was

there seemed certain, but he hoped they did not know in which compartment he was.

He reached out feebly and secured his revolver, but it shook in his grasp, and he would not have had the courage and judgment to use it. No part of the warlike spirit common to his countrymen was in him then. He had never had any great supply.

The whispering between the Italians was renewed, but Monsieur Smith could not distinguish anything that they said.

Still unconscious of the trouble brewing, Curly Kell kept his place by the door and waited for new patrons, but the last had arrived. It was not a good night, financially, for the Happy Haven, and Cobweb's face was long as he meditated on the fact.

Having a keen business inclination, he was as much interested as though the place was his own.

When twelve o'clock had come and passed he spread a blanket on the floor near the door and lay down, himself. He supposed that all his customers were in the land of slumber, and intended to follow them if no new-comers appeared.

The long sleeping-room was silent, and the low-turned gas broke the darkness but did not dispel it.

More time passed, and the young janitor was asleep.

Anon, the door of one of the compartments opened and Monk Merry came out. With soft, slow steps he crossed the floor and approached the door. He had heard Kell turn the key, but did not know whether the latter remained in the lock.

This was a question of some importance, for Mr. Merry was anxious to take George Franklin and leave the lodging-house. Ever since he had seen the Frenchman he had known that it was no place for him.

Reaching the door, he discovered that the key was not there.

Plainly, he thought, it was in Kell's pocket, and he turned that way without delay. Kneeling, he began the search, and the Prodigy slept too soundly to be awakened. The key, however, did not reward Monk's efforts.

"Got ter wake him up," the ragged man thought, regretfully. "Hang the luck! He'll make a pile o' talk, an' that will wake up the Frencher. But I've got ter resk it. Wonder ef he's asleep now?"

Softly he glided to the door of Smith's compartment and listened. He heard nothing. The Frenchman, however, was not asleep; he was too much alarmed to reach that state.

Deciding that everything was favorable for his venture, Monk turned, anxious to arouse Kell and get away, but he had a shock when he turned.

A woman stood before him.

He had not known about the person who was occupying the small room, so he had no clew to this appearance, and he stood speechless and motionless before her.

She laid her hand on his arm.

"Come with me!" she directed.

"Where?" he asked, startled.

"Where I can talk with you."

"But I don't want ter talk."

"I do."

"Talk ter them who wants ter hear yer!"

Merry answered, in a surly voice.

She tightened her hold on his arm.

"If you value your safety, and your future success, you will obey me. Refuse, and I will give an alarm here. Comply, and I'll take you only a few steps, and detain you but a moment."

Monk sighed and yielded. He had met women of her kind before, and knew they were perfectly unmanageable.

"Lead on!" he directed.

She obeyed; they passed through a door and stood in the small room to which Cobwebs had conducted her. If the latter had seen the sight he would have been astonished.

In all his experience at the Happy Haven he had not suspected that a door existed between the two rooms. Strictly speaking, there was none. Unknown to the janitor there was a movable section of the dividing wall. Madame Lapierre had made good use of this.

She closed the door and turned up the gas.

Monk Merry improved the increase of light and, looking with interest, saw what he regarded as a very fine woman. Only for his haste to get away unseen by the Frenchman, he would not have felt any desire to get rid of his present companion.

"Whom have you been looking for?" she asked, abruptly.

"Me? Nobody."
 "It is false!"
 "Now, you wrong me," asserted Monk, trying to appear innocent.
 "Why were you listening at one of the compartments?"
 "I heard somebody groan, an'—"
 "Why will you lie to me?"
 "My dear woman, I ain't lyin'. Guess you don't know me—"
 "I know you very well."
 "You do?"
 "Yes."
 "Who be I?"
 "Just now, you call yourself Monk Merry!"
 The ragged man was startled.
 "Who be *you*?" he demanded.
 "One who knows you well."
 "I reckon my business ain't your business."

He spoke surlily. His transient admiration for her had vanished. He was afraid of her, and his regard expressed suspicion, hostility and menace.

"You are mistaken," she calmly replied. "Just the opposite state of affairs exists. Your business is my business."

"Not by a durned sight! Who be you, anyhow, that tries to cut sech a wide swath?"

"I am Madame Lapierre. Does the name enlighten you any?"

"Not a bit."

"I did not expect it would. I have the advantage of you, you see; I know you, your name, your history. I know a good deal about you, my man."

"I s'posed this lodgin'-house was a private place," growled Monk, in fast-increasing anger; "an' now I'd like ter know why crazy women are 'lowed ter go snoopin' around ter annoy decent folks. I'll hev my money back, or—"

"Gent y! You need not blame the house or its keepers; no guilt lies there. Blame me, alone; I can bear it. But we talk at random, Mr. Merry. Whom do you wish to see?"

"Nobody."

"How poorly you lie! You were spying at Jean Beauclaire's door. Can it be that you wanted to tell him anything about the boy, Vincent?"

Monk's face betrayed guilt and alarm, but he persisted in his policy doggedly.

"I don't know what you talk about."

"You lie!" was the impertinent retort. "You tire me, fellow! Let us have an understanding; don't think me a mere guesser. I know as much about Beauclaire's affairs as you do. Where is the boy?"

"I s'pose I kin say a word in this case," growled Merry. "You are a woman, an' you use a woman's right ter abuse the male sex when you feel like it. That don't alter the facts an' artom. You are wholly on the wrong track—"

"Do you deny that you know of the boy?"

"Yes."

"And yet you stole him!"

"Look here, old lady, you are goin' too chipper. I won't stand it."

"Did you ever hear of the Sons of the Stiletto?" the Frenchwoman abruptly asked.

"Never."

"Very likely you tell the truth now. I'll tell you what they are. It is a league formed in Italy: a band of brothers, so-called. Just what its aim and purpose is I don't know, but I presume it is like most other leagues: for the benefit of its members. This much is certain: He who incurs the enmity of the Sons of the Stiletto is a doomed man. That is precisely the fix Jean Beauclaire is in."

"What is that ter me?"

"Do you want to pin your faith to a man who is bound to go down like a bullet?"

"I pin my faith to no one."

"You must, and shall. Some one you must side with in this case; there is no other way. Will you go with Jean Beauclaire, or with me? Make your decision at once!"

CHAPTER V.

THE SONS OF THE STILETTO MOVE.

MONK MERRY was perplexed, as well as alarmed. Much that Madame Lapierre had said was true, and her knowledge worried him. A good deal he did not understand at all, and he was like one groping in the dark. Light he might have gained by meeting her frankly, perhaps, but he would not do that.

He did know of the boy she referred to, and the boy was not many yards away. It was clear that she did not know of "George Washington's" proximity, and if he had been anxious

to get the latter away unseen before, he was doubly so now.

He shifted his position uneasily and heaved a sigh.

"You take me unfair," he remonstrated, "but I don't see no reason why we shouldn't be friends."

"Look you, my man!" the Frenchwoman exclaimed, "if you see fit to come in under my wing, and stand steadfastly by me, I will see that you make money out of it."

"Money is good."

"Will you deliver the boy to me?"

"I don't know nothin' about no boy."

She grasped the speaker's arm fiercely.

"Fool! I tell you that Jean Beauclaire is doomed. The Sons of the Stiletto are on his track, and they never spare. Once let a man be sentenced in their council, and he is the same as dead; earth nor sea can hide him from their knives. They will kill Beauclaire—then where will you be? You must make money out of me or out of Beauclaire. When he is dead, as he will be soon, only I shall remain. Will you throw away your chance with me?"

"Suppose I do?"

"Then I'll have you arrested!"

"Great Scott! What fur?"

"Stealing the child!"

Monk Merry stood in silence, and Madame Lapierre rapidly added:

"I will follow you through the streets, and, as soon as we meet a policeman, I will point to you and say: 'Arrest that man! He is a child-stealer!'"

"You're bent on havin' your own way, so have it," returned Merry, in an ugly tone.

"What do you want?"

"The child."

"I'll lead yer to him, ter-morrer."

"Why not now?"

"At one o'clock at night? Not much! But I'll 'tend to 't in the mornin', ef you'll pay."

"You shall be paid. Mind, you are to keep out of Jean Beauclaire's sight!"

"I will."

"You saw him here, of course. I have been spying on him. I thought he had a clew to the whereabouts of the child, though I now believe otherwise. Beauclaire is the worst-frightened man in New York, and he has cause. The Sons of the Stiletto are on his track, and he knows it. More than that, he knows their power and vindictiveness. He lives in constant terror. He knows not when he will be struck down. He sees a foe in every man he meets, and shakes as if with ague. Dreadful is the way of the Sons of the Stiletto!"

The speaker proved that she was not talking for effect by shivering, and looking around as if she expected to see one of the band spring up at that moment.

"Why be they down on Beauclaire?" Monk asked.

"He was once a member, but he proved false. Now he is doomed, and they are on his track. They will get him, too; they never fail."

"You seem well posted on them."

"My name is on their list; I am a member."

"Oh! an' you've set 'em onter Beauclaire."

"No, no; I have not. I fear them too much to be active in any of their schemes. *Mon Dieu!* my sex would not save me, if they took a fancy to slay me. Nicolo Mazzeo, their chief, is a human tiger."

"Pleasant fellers, b' mighty!"

"Now return to your sleeping-place. Use every precaution to avoid Beauclaire's gaze. You cannot serve two masters. You must be true to me or to him. You have made your choice; see to it that you abide by it. Besides this secret door, by which I can at any moment enter the main room, there is a secret means of keeping watch. This I shall do all night; I shall sit tirelessly at my post, and if you go near Beauclaire, or seek to leave the room, I shall see you. Beware that you do no act of treachery!"

"You live here, I s'pose?"

"No."

"You're here, anyhow."

"I was watching Beauclaire. It is a race between him and me to regain the boy, with the chances in my favor. He is so much in terror of the Sons of the Stiletto that his movements are seriously hampered. I had resolved to watch him all the time, which is why I came here, but sight of you gave me a better plan. I shall keep my vigil to-night, but when day dawns, Beauclaire can go to thunder!"

It was an expression not strictly lady-like, but Monk Merry was not surprised.

Ragged as he was, he had a ready faculty of

analyzing the human race, and would not have made the mistake of thinking her a lady.

He rebelled no more against her orders, and she opened the secret door and let him pass into the main room.

He at once went with stealthy steps to his compartment.

Once there, he let his anger have freer play, and went through a series of gymnastic gestures as if he were punching a foe in deadly combat.

"Curse the woman!" he whispered. "So she will try ter make a cat's-paw o' me, eh? She don't know Monk Merry. By the fiends! I'll beat her out, or one of us will git blamedly hurt. Give up the boy ter her? I'll see her in perdition first!"

He looked toward George. That football of fortune lay in sound slumber, one hand under his cheek and unconscious of the schemes and counter-schemes going on around him.

"I've got ter git him out on the sly afore day," added Monk. "But how kin I?"

He shook his bushy head at the thought. Madame Lapierre had declared that she would watch all night, and she was just the woman to keep a post with unwavering vigilance.

Monk did not see his way clear. She had declared that he could not get out unseen—how would it be if he tried to take George away? He knew, and the boy knew, that the absurd name of George Washington Franklin did not belong to the latter.

His true name was Vincent, and it was likely that Madame Lapierre would recognize him as soon as she got her eyes on the boy.

While Monk was trying to see his way clear, he noticed that Curly Kell was stirring. Stealthy as the late prowler had been in his movements, the janitor had been aroused. He was too late to detect Merry, but he awoke with the impression that something was wrong.

He arose, walked around, looked the place over, and then returned to his old position.

Under ordinary circumstances he would have gone to sleep again at once, but recollection of the strange woman made him thoughtful, wondering and wakeful.

He was in this mood when, after a long period of silence in the place, a slight sound revealed the opening of a door. He looked, and saw a man standing by one of the compartments.

He readily recognized it as one in which he had put two Italians, and was about to speak and ask what was wanted when the scene assumed an aspect which arrested the question.

The first man, after a pause and silent survey, turned and made a gesture, and his companion came out. Then the leader made another gesture, and they went to the door next to theirs and began to listen.

All this was so suspicious that Cobwebs could not assign it to natural causes.

"Robbers!" he muttered. "I've took in some pesky scamps, an' they think they kin raise Cain hyar. We'll see! I'll nab 'em!"

And the janitor lay as quiet as the bed itself, resolved to let them go and commit themselves fully before giving an alarm.

If the gas had not been turned so low he would have seen the matter in a different light. The door before which they were listening was Beauclaire's, and each of the prowlers carried a knife in his hand.

Careful listening failed to bring any sound to their ears to indicate that the Frenchman was awake, so they softly opened the door and entered.

Beauclaire was about to meet his deadly foes!

CHAPTER VI.

TROUBLOUS TIMES AT THE HAPPY HAVEN.

THERE was a short silence, and Curly Kell was about to rise and move forward, intent upon his little plan of catching the Italians in the "robbery," but the plan went all to pieces.

There was a sudden flash of light in the Frenchman's compartment, and then the report of a revolver brought Kell to his feet as though operated by machinery.

He was startled, but the excitement had only begun.

Close upon the revolver-shot came a wild yell—one which brought every person in the room out of slumber, and proved alarming in the extreme. The Prodigy of Paradise Park had seen thrilling and startling scenes in his day, but never before had he heard a cry so full of terror.

Then came a shuffling sound, and the noise of several dull blows.

Kell did not doubt that murder was being done, and he turned the gas up quickly and ran forward to the compartment. Just before he

reached it the Italians came out. Neither carried a knife; neither showed any great excitement.

They made a movement to pass Kell, but he sprung in front of them.

"Stop!" he ordered. "What have you been up ter?"

"Out of the way!" retorted one of the men; and he would have run the janitor down by mere force of weight if he had not made a slight mistake as to the caliber of the person mentioned.

There had been lawless men and lawless scenes in the Happy Haven before that night, and Mahalaleel Tubbs, the proprietor, always kept a revolver there. It was next to an imperative necessity.

When the trouble began Kell had not forgotten the weapon. He took it along with him, and, just as he was about being run down by the Italian, the latter found the weapon turned upon him.

"No, you don't!" the janitor cried. "I say 'Halt!' and you had better mind!"

His courage was good, but he had to deal with men old in crime and experienced in ways and means. Believing they had just done murder, the Sons of the Stiletto disregarded the command.

One of them struck at Kell's arm and partially turned the weapon aside, and then the boy was first caught up in strong arms and then flung heavily to the floor.

He rolled over and over until, half-stunned, he brought up against the wall.

As soon as possible he scrambled to his feet, but, just as he did so, the room suddenly became totally dark. One of the Italians had turned out the gas.

The janitor was dizzy from his fall, but made his way as well as he could toward the gas-fixture to renew the light. By that time, of course, all was confusion in the place. The lodgers were nearly all in motion, and making a good deal of racket.

Up went the light, showing the group, but the Italians were not there. Some one else was, and Kell found himself confronted by Madame Lapierre.

"Has any one left the place?" she demanded, imperiously.

He disregarded the question and hurried to the apartment where the revolver-shot had been fired. He fully expected to find "Monsieur Smith" a dead man, and first view seemed to confirm the belief.

The contour of the bed indicated a human form under the covers, and in the topmost article was a gash which thrust itself into view with surprising plainness.

Cobwebs tore off the covers. No man, living or dead, was there, but the blankets had been gathered into shape so as to form a dummy.

Just as comprehension of the trick began to dawn upon the janitor he was treated to a startling sight. At one side of the narrow bed a human hand stole into view, and a revolver was turned full upon Kell.

This crisis was not open to question: he was in the utmost peril. Fortunately, his presence of mind did not desert him, and he gave one leap and seized the hostile hand.

"No, yer don't!" he cried. "I ain't got ready ter be perforated, yit. Come out o' hyer!"

He pulled away at the arm, but its owner hung back doggedly, and Kell found himself unequal to the demands of the occasion. Some of the lodgers were at his back, however, and, when they gave their aid, Jean Beauclaire, alias "Smith," was pulled out from under the rude bed without ceremony.

He had lost his revolver in the struggle, but was not in condition to use it, in any case.

His face was pallid; his eyes were wild; he was the image of utmost terror.

Clasping his hands beseechingly he looked up with eyes which saw but dimly.

"Spare me! spare me!" he gasped. "Let me live, and I will be your slave forever."

"We ain't lookin' fur slaves," was Kell's practical reply. "What in time is bein' done here, mister?"

"I will go away; I will never speak of ze band again; I will go to ze farrest land—"

"Let up! Bring yer mind onter every-day fax. Don't yer see we ain't enemies? Has somebody tried ter do ye up, mister?"

At last he succeeded in getting a little common sense into the Frenchman, who brushed his hand across his dimmed eyes and looked around. He saw no one present who looked like an Italian.

"Where have they gone?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Ze men who tried to kill me."

"Did they do that?"

Beauclaire turned to the bed. The gash in the cover again put itself into view prominently.

"Zey struck wiz ze knife, but I had put ze dummy in ze place, and I was not there."

"Who fired the revolver?"

"I did."

"At them?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you fire afore they used the knife?"

"Yes; but zey had come to murder me."

"Guess you're about right thar. But why did they try it? What do they want ter kill ye fur?"

This was a question too straightforward for Beauclaire's taste, and he did not meet it fairly.

"Zey hate me!" he replied.

"How did they know you was here?"

"I don't know."

The Frenchman shivered as he spoke. Recollection of the events of the night were enough to dismay even a stronger-minded man. When he had discovered that the Italians had followed him to the lodging-house he had been in a fever of alarm. Few coherent thoughts had come to him, but among them was one that had saved his life.

He had made the dummy and crawled under the frame substitute for a bedstead, and when, after hours of trembling, the avengers had come, they had been deceived.

True, he had fired at them before the knife was used, but he had thrust his hand up over the bed, the same as when he aimed at Kell, and, in the darkness, they had not noticed but he lay upon it.

At that moment Madame Lapierre pushed her way through the men and accosted Kell.

"Where is Monk Merry?" she demanded.

"Who?"

"Monk Merry."

"Don't know him—yes; I do, too. He's the man with rags that is alive. Dunno whar he is."

"He has run away."

"His bill is paid."

"Perdition take his bill!" cried the woman, in a passion. "Have you helped him away?"

"Me? No; I've got my own biz ter look after, an' no time ter meddle with nobody else's biz. Some folks has sech time. Ef Monk is a chum o' yourn, why didn't yer stick ter him?"

Cobwebs was beginning to resent the Frenchwoman's imperious way, but she suddenly took a new start. At the first sound of her voice, Jean Beauclaire's gaze had been drawn to her. It did not waver; he gazed like one fascinated.

She now returned his gaze, and a contemptuous smile curled her lips.

"What a craven wretch!" she exclaimed.

"Mebbe you want a revolver-an'-knife circus," suggested one of the lodgers.

"He is made in the image of man," she went on, "but, oh! what a thing of cowardice he is!"

"You here!" muttered Beauclaire.

"Haven't I a right to be here?"

"Ze buzzards follow ze wounded ox."

"Do they ever follow the sneak-wolf?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Beauclaire, with sudden life, "you brought zis upon me, woman!"

"The craven raves."

"Who s'all have betrayed me but you?"

"For once, you err."

"You hate me; you set ze assassins upon me."

"Ef that's so, le's fling the she-tiger out o' the winder!"

The suggestion came from one of the lodgers. Madame Lapierre was not making any friends there. She glanced at her companions; there was real danger for her in the circle of rough men, some of whom were so filled with liquor as to be in that quarrelsome condition sometimes termed "irresponsible."

She was cunning enough to look out for herself.

"Gentlemen, you must understand this affair," she asserted. "Yonder person was a member of a secret society which, no doubt, was good and noble in its object and conduct."

"A society of assassins!" groaned Beauclaire.

"He, however, proved a false brother; he betrayed them; he turned against them. Now he is suffering the consequence, and he has only himself to blame for whatever may happen."

"Is zis true?" cried Beauclaire. "I am not so sure of ze fact. Who set ze ruffians upon me? Who, if it ees not you?"

"Now you hev it, old lady!"

Lapierre saw that the sympathies of the crowd

were against her, and that, instead of trying to injure Beauclaire, it would be wise to act promptly in order to keep the rough men around her from any act of violence.

She strongly denied having set the Sons of the Stiletto upon the hunted man, and then turned away and went to the compartment lately occupied by Monk Merry.

Curly Kell had decided that she must leave the Happy Haven, unless that place was to belie its name, and he followed her.

As he reached her side she started suddenly and turned toward him.

"Has not this place been occupied by two persons?"

"Yes," Cobwebs answered.

"Who, besides Merry?"

"The boy."

"The boy?" exclaimed Lapierre, with vehemence. "Do you mean to say that he had a boy with him?"

"He did, fur sure."

"How did he look?" she demanded, eagerly.

"Wal, I dunno; he was a good 'eal shorter than I be, an' must 'a' been younger; mebbe eight or nine; an' he was a delikit, quiet, fair-headed little chap—"

"*Mon Dieu!* it is the same!" the woman cried, fiercely. "Merry has outwitted me! Has he, though? No! By heavens! I'll follow and overtake them!"

And she started for the door.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ITALIAN, AGAIN.

CURLY KELL breathed a sigh of relief. There had been nothing but trouble in the Happy Haven since Madame Lapierre invaded the lodging-house, and though she was not responsible for the whole of it, he was anxious to see the door close behind her.

He was not to be gratified at once, however. She had nearly reached the door when she stopped short, hesitated, and then came back.

"It is useless," she observed, viciously. "Merry and the boy must be several blocks away, and it would be folly to try and overtake them in this Babel. Oh! fool that I was!"

"What's eatin' you now?"

This question was not very dignified, but Kell could not help asking it. He was disgusted with the woman who had made him so much trouble and turned his peaceful life into worry. She, however, was too much preoccupied to notice the question.

"Why did I take it for granted that Merry was alone? Why did I not suspect that the boy was with him? That bundle of rags has neither home nor money; he could not well hide his prey."

"Who is the boy, anyhow?" Cobwebs asked, curiously.

Madame Lapierre flashed a glance toward Jean Beauclaire's quarters. He was in his compartment, and beyond the sound of their voices. She took a five-dollar bank-note from her purse.

"Do you see that?"

"Slightly!"

"Do you want it?"

"That depends."

"Who knows that a boy was here with Merry?"

"Nobody but me. They was the first ones in, an' the little feller went inter the place there right away, an' did not come out till he an' Merry skipped arter the Eyetilians turned down the gas."

"Promise not to tell any living person about the boy, and this money is yours."

"Nary promise!" returned the janitor, stoutly. "That's the second time you hev tried ter bribe me. You may as wal give it up; I don't want yer money!"

"Foolish boy! Look at your ragged clothes—"

"They're honest rags!"

"Think again. I will give you ten dollars—"

"Not a cent! We may as wal drop the sub-jick. I be poor, an' money ain't ter be sneezed at, but I won't be bribed ter help no mean game. That's flat! Ma'am, you've kicked up quite a rumpus here, which is dead ag'in' the rules o' the Happy Haven. I should like ter see you take a skip, now!"

"I shall go when I get ready!"

"What ef I call a p'leeceman?"

Madame Lapierre regarded the Prodigy in silence, but her expression betrayed vindictive hatred.

"Boy," she finally said, "you are built just right to wind up in State Prison, eventually. You belong to a rank in life where one must be either honest or shrewd to keep out of the jug. You are neither. You reject friends when you

see them, and you are bound to go to ruin. Go ahead! I hope you will!"

"All right, 'Liza Jane!' Kell gravely returned.

The woman did not hear the last words. She had turned her gaze again upon Beauclaire, and, finding herself free from observation, she made a quick, fresh start, reached the door, passed out and hurried down toward the street.

Kell drew a sigh of relief.

"Never had sech a tiger-cat in here afore," he asserted, "an' I hope I'll never hev another."

Jean Beauclaire was a man particularly unfortunate, it seemed. Just as time enough had elapsed to make Madame Lapierre's escape certain, he approached Cobwebs.

"Where is zat womans?" he asked.

"She's skipped."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"How miserable! I wished to see her."

"Wal, you're all out o' date fur that."

"I should have spoken wiz her at once, but I was sorely affrighted—ze courage was gone away from me. Now, I s'all see her no more!"

He spoke in a mournful voice, and, weak as he had shown himself, he aroused Kell's sympathy.

"Shouldn't s'pose you'd want ter see sech a tigeress."

"Ah! but she may know where my boy s'all be."

"Your boy?"

"My son—my only child."

"What about him?"

"He is lost."

"Where? When? How?"

"They have stolen him; I know not who, but ze woman is my enemy, and I think zat she s'all be ze one. Yes; my son, Vincent, is stolen—a young child, as fair and gentle as zetamed deer, wiz fair hair and a handsome face. My poor boy, Vincent!"

"Do you know a feller named Monk Merry?"

"Ah! I know him too well: a man of low life, wiz ze impulse of Judas in his depraved mind."

"Don't s'pose he's got yer boy, do yer?"

"Who s'all say?"

"Mebbe I kin. I don't want ter raise false hopes, mister, but I b'lieve Monk has got him, an' that they has both been here ter-night."

"Here?" cried Beauclaire, with a start. "My boy, Vincent, here?"

"He's gone now, anyhow; more's the pity; but I'll bet a steam drill ag'in' a sewer-pipe it was him."

"Mon Dieu! you s'all confuse me already, much. V'at mean you? Speak! Give me light! My boy, Vincent, here?"

Beauclaire was getting excited, and working himself into a condition of fresh nervousness, but Kell proceeded to tell what he knew about the case in clear, terse terms. When he had finished, there was no doubt in the Frenchman's mind.

"My boy! my boy!" he exclaimed. "He have been so near me, and I knew it not. Oh! ill luck, ill luck! And what s'all become of ze poor child?"

"You must find him."

"I? Ah-h-h! you know not how I am situated. Ze Sons of ze Stiletto hunt me as though I am ze wild beast. Wherever I go zey s'all be on my trail. I know me no peace, no rest. Zis night zey come and try to kill me, as you s'all have seen."

"Who an' what be them pesky reptyles?"

"A secret society, mostly of ze Italians, but wiz ze Frenchman, ze Pole, ze Bohemian. I join it, thinking it s'all prove a good society, but find zat zey are banded only to rob and murder; and when I try to leave them, zen zey condemn me in their council, and I am hunted by assassins. Every moment my life it is in ze peril!"

Beauclaire shivered and looked nervously around.

Curly Kell did not find it hard to believe this account. He had never heard of the Sons of the Stiletto until that night, but he did know that like organizations existed in New York. Some cases had come before the public, and into court, where a member who had incurred the enmity of the general band had been slain by its assassins, and the janitor had heard of other broils which had not been so widely known.

He sympathized with Beauclaire, and appreciated his position. With all the police of Gotham nominally back of him, the man was helpless. Until some act of violence had been committed the authorities would and could do

no more, in case of a claim to protection, than to caution the society.

That caution would amount to nothing. Desperate men would not be deterred by warnings; they would seek the first opportunity to strike the fatal blow, reckless of consequences.

Kell did not feel capable of advising Beauclaire in this emergency, and did not attempt it.

The Happy Haven had grown quiet, and most of the men had returned to their beds. One of them raised his voice in protest against conversation, and the janitor induced the Frenchman to return to his own compartment.

No further disturbance occurred, and Cobwebs, at least, slept soundly the remainder of the night.

After eight o'clock in the morning the lodgers began to go away. They did not look any better in the light of day. They were, as a rule, ragged, shaggy, bleary-eyed and worthless fellows. Few had any greater object in life than to exist. Having slept, they wandered out to get food—and drink—the best way they could.

Beauclaire was one of the last to go. He went with hesitation and timidity, looking nervously at every person, and at every doorway, as he did so.

Full well did he know the terrible power of the Sons of the Stiletto.

Mahalaleel Tubbs, proprietor of the Happy Haven, returned soon after. He was a queer old man, stout, unpolished, good-natured; and noticeable for a head which, bald in places, had tufts of obstinate hair elsewhere which stood on end as if in defiance.

Kell was not surprised, in light of the most recent developments, to learn that the note, by which Madame Lapierre had gained entrance to the smaller room, was a forgery; but Mr. Tubbs was surprised to learn of the secret door. He looked it over long and carefully, and ended with the verdict:

"Wal, she's a cute one, b'jinks!"

"An' she's been here afore you an' me ever was," added Kell.

"Jehiel," said Mr. Tubbs, solemnly, "let us hope she will never come ag'in."

"Correck! I hev had enough on her!" Kell fervently agreed.

With the return of his employer Kell's duties ended for the day, and he left the building, had breakfast, and then wandered on in an absent-minded way, barely conscious of the direction he was taking.

He had seen many exciting scenes at the Happy Haven, but never any that so much interested him as what had occurred the night before. He could not understand it at all. Beauclaire, Madame Lapierre, Monk Merry, Vincent, the Sons of the Stiletto and their two assassins, were all actors in a drama to which he had no clew.

Supposing that he would never see any of them again, he felt no little curiosity as to the outcome of affairs. Who would win the struggle for Vincent, and would Beauclaire escape the Sons of the Stiletto?

It was easier to surmise the proper answer to the last question than to the former.

When Cobwebs aroused from meditation, he found himself standing in front of Grace Church, with the big white spire towering far above him. Going a little further, he turned into a side-street, his object being to cross to Fourth avenue and see an acquaintance who kept a small shop there.

He did not pass through the intervening street. He was on his way when voices led him to look to one side. A lady stood in a doorway, and a man on the accompanying stoop, and first sight of him made Kell start.

He recognized one of the Italians who had tried to kill Beauclaire.

"Come to-night," the lady was saying, kindly, "and we will help you all we can."

"Bless you, goody lady!" the Son of the Stiletto replied, fervently. "May all the saints guard, protect and be with you."

And, with a few more servile words, he turned away so suddenly that Kell had no chance to move off. He came face to face with the Italian.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT SCHEME IS THIS?

COBWEBS was a boy whose wits had been sharpened in the severe school of adversity, and that means a good deal in the City of New York; and he had formed an opinion as to the scene before him.

He saw that the unknown lady was intelligent and refined, while the Italian's humble,

servile manner was in marked contrast to his ferocious attempt to murder Beauclaire only a few hours before.

These facts, taken in connection with the lady's words, had awakened the suspicion in the janitor's mind that the wily Italian was deceiving her.

If the fellow had been as observant as usual he would have seen Kell, and, perhaps, recognized him, but he was acting the rôle of humility.

Consequently, he bent the gaze of his wicked eyes upon the sidewalk and passed by within four feet of the boy without seeing him distinctly.

Curly drew a breath of relief, dodged into a doorway, and kept that place of concealment until the Son of the Stiletto had turned down Broadway and disappeared.

Then the young janitor did some careful thinking for several minutes.

"B'jinks! I'll risk it!" he finally decided. "As long as I b'lieve as I do, I ain't got no right ter let them go without warnin'. I'll drop in an' see how the land lays, sure pop!"

And he hastened to ring the bell of the house at which the Italian had recently applied. The summons was answered by a servant, and when he asked to see the lady of the house he had no difficulty, even with his old clothes, in reaching the presence of the same gentle-faced lady he had seen in conversation with the Son of the Stiletto.

She came to him in the parlor to which, much to his surprise, he had been conducted without waste of words. The janitor rose and made his prettiest bow.

"Did you wish to see me, my lad?" she asked, kindly.

"Yes, mum; that was my cardinal objick."

"I do not recognize you. Pray, what is your name?"

"Cobwebs."

"What?"

"Oh! I meant ter say Curly Kell, the Prodigy of Paradise Park."

"You amaze me. I don't understand."

She looked bewildered, while Kell remained as grave as ever.

"My every-day name is Jehiel Kellar."

"Oh! I see. The others are *sobriquets*, while the latter is your baptismal name."

"Now you hev got me!" admitted Kell; "but it don't matter. You've had comp'ny, lately."

"How did you know that?"

"I seen him."

"Do you refer to the Italian?"

"That's the very snake I refer ter, mum."

"You apply an uncomplimentary term to him."

"Do you know the feller?"

"No. He came to me to-day for help, and said there was sickness and distress at his home. Benevolent people had sent in food, doctors, and the like, so that they were not needy in that respect; and the family was so large that there were enough to care for the sick; but there was still trouble for them. He had a daughter, ten years old, who was very sensitive and nervous, and the family sickness affected her so that she was worrying herself ill, while they had no means, owing to lack of room and money, of separating her from the big tribe around her."

The lady seemed to have forgotten Kell, and, speaking in a sympathetic voice, went over the Italian's story in a manner showing deep interest.

"Wal?" questioned Kell.

"Oh! I am going to take little Bianca in here for the time being."

"An' she's a total stranger?"

"Is she less worthy?"

"The 'worthy' part is another question."

"She is, you must remember, a delicate child. I should be unfeeling to refuse her shelter. Besides, she is so nervous that, to keep her quiet, her father will remain with her while she is here."

"Hi! is he comin' here, too?" cried Cobwebs.

"Both will share my home, by night, for the present."

"An' he's used the gal as a wedge ter work his way in here, eh?"

The lady did not answer at once, but regarded the Prodigy intently for several moments. Then she made reply:

"I have spoken to you with singular frankness, I must confess, but it was because I was absorbed in little Bianca's case. Pray, what do you know about them, and what is your own errand here?"

"Did you ever hear o' the Sons of the Stiletto?"

"Never."

"You've heard o' secret societies in this here city that ain't like honest societies?"

"I have read of such."

"Jes' so. Wal, that Italian b'longs ter a society, an' I seen him try ter kill another man with a knife, last night."

"Impossible!" cried the lady.

"Why, onpossible?"

"He is a very meek, worthy man."

"You ain't seen him afore ter-day, eh?"

"No; but I can read human nature. He applied here to ask for a little money, and, in our conversation, the history of his family troubles was told. I am sure he is a worthy man."

"Do you think it proper ter try an' knife a feller-man?"

"You must be in error."

"But I ain't," Kell stoutly persisted.

"How did it happen?" the lady asked, incredulously.

Cobwebs told what he thought was necessary. Not supposing that an explanation of great length would be of any interest to his hearer he did not mention any names, but spoke of the Sons of the Stiletto as he had heard that society described; and then said that one innocent man who, after being decoyed into joining, had deserted when he learned how evil the society and its ways were, had been playing a game of hide-and-seek to save his own life from their assassin daggers; and that the sequel to the affair had nearly come in the Happy Haven lodging-house.

The lady still looked incredulous.

"I find it impossible to believe," she answered, "but, even if the two Italians are one, what unworthy object can he have in bringing his little girl here?"

Kell glanced about the room.

"Plunder!"

"Do you see anything especially costly here? This is a plainly-furnished house, and we keep no money here."

"It don't take much ter tempt a feller who lives by his wits, mum."

Where the discussion would have ended cannot be known, for they were interrupted by the return from the street of a second lady, younger than the first.

Kell was not long in learning that he had been talking with a Mrs. Stanley, and that she was owner of the house, while the second lady was her niece, and named Mrs. Belden.

The janitor liked her from the first. She seemed just as kind as her aunt, and far more world-wise. In fact, there was an air of quiet decision about her that indicated ability to care for herself.

She was looking curiously at Cobwebs, and not with any great show of approval, and an explanation soon followed. She was informed of her aunt's contemplated charity to the Italian and his daughter, and that Kell was there to object, and to tell a story about the son of Italy.

Mrs. Belden gave the janitor a more friendly glance.

"Surely, aunt, you will heed this warning," she observed.

"Why should I?"

"I suppose you want to guard your own life?"

"I insist that this boy has got two Italians mixed up," persisted Mrs. Stanley.

"An' I'm dead-sure o' my facks," declared Kell.

"Then it would be madness to let the man in here," added Mrs. Belden.

"Madness!" echoed the aunt, with dissatisfaction.

"We should run the risk of being murdered."

"I don't see," asserted the elder lady, warmly, "why every one is down upon the poor. Just because I see fit to spend some of my money in charity, I raise a great hue and cry. To me, the cause of the poor is sacred, and I do not intend to desert them."

"The worthy poor certainly deserve all we can do for them," Mrs. Belden freely admitted, "but you must confess that you have often been deceived and victimized by frauds—"

"I am not deceived now, and will not be turned from my purpose. The Italians will stay here to-night!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE PLOTTERS READY FOR BUSINESS.

MRS. STANLEY was proving that she possessed ample obstinacy when aroused, and Curley Kell was so disgusted that he was about to rise abruptly when a secret gesture from Mrs. Belden caused him to change his mind and keep his seat.

The latter abandoned her attempt to persuade her aunt, and tried to turn conversation upon other subjects, but, after sitting for a while

with compressed lips, Mrs. Stanley suddenly rose.

"I will leave you to entertain your ward, Cecelia!" she declared, and left the room.

Kell looked gravely at Mrs. Belden.

"I'm afeerd I've put my foot in it!" he remarked.

"Don't mind it. Aunt Hannah is a peculiar woman, but very good-hearted. I want to know if you are sure of your verdict in regard to the Italian who came to our door. Is he the one who used the knife at your quarters?"

"He is, sure-pop!"

"Then why is he here?"

"Fur mischief."

"I fail to see what his object is. My aunt is wealthy, but, not being given to ostentation, this house is plainly furnished, and all her money is kept elsewhere. I doubt if she has ten dollars, in cash."

"Mebbe the scheme is ter abductionize her, fur ter git a ransom."

"That may be."

"Anyhow, you want ter look out fur Mr. Italian. I tell yer, that feller is a bad 'un. I ain't prejudiced ag'inst nobody, but he is the worst kind of a bad chap. You ought ter see him a bit. When he was at my lodgin'-house—the Happy Haven, terms only twenty cents a night—he looked like a reg'lar stage-villain; an', when I seen him here with yer aunt, the ear-marks of the Old Nick shone through his humble air like the sun through a thin fog. Look out fur him, mum!"

"It is useless to warn my aunt—she is a very odd woman. Reared in the country, she came to New York at the age of forty and has lived in this house always, seldom going out, and then only on an errand of charity. She is rich, and has a mania to give to the poor, but simplicity and want of judgment lead her to give to unworthy persons, and she is often victimized. Her visionary nature has made us much trouble."

The speaker sighed as she ceased speaking.

"Will she really take in the Italian?"

"I cannot doubt it."

"Then she'll come ter grief."

"What can be done?"

"Can't you scheme, too?"

"How?"

"Smuggle a couple p'leecemen in here."

"You give me an ideal!" Mrs. Belden returned, with sudden animation. "I have a plan which I will use on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you remain here to-night. You have made a charge, and ought to stand by it, if properly paid. Again, you, alone, can say that the Italian is a desperate man, if we take steps against him. Instead of having policemen here I will give you a note to carry to two men on South Fifth Avenue. They were once in my service, and will gladly help me."

This was more than Curly Kell had bargained for, but, after a little thought, he decided not to refuse the request.

He knew that Mahalaleel Tubbs would not object to his being away from the lodging-house for one night.

The result of the talk which followed between Kell and Mrs. Belden was that, at an early hour of the evening, the Prodigy, Sim Oakes and Mike Keefe were secretly admitted to the house at the basement-door by Mrs. Belden, and given quarters in a room on the second floor.

Oakes and Keefe were the two men selected by Mrs. Belden.

The room given them had double advantage. It was one not likely to be entered by any person in the house, as it contained furniture belonging to Mrs. Belden, which she had stored there, and it was next to that room in which it was believed Mrs. Stanley would receive the Italian and his putative daughter.

Nicolo Mazzeo did not forget the appointment, and, at eight o'clock, he rung the bell.

Being admitted, he was soon in Mrs. Stanley's presence.

Between the two rooms there was a transom which had glass set in it. This arrangement had always been objectionable to the present mistress of the house, and she had had a strip of cloth nailed on one side, so as to make the rooms more private.

The glass was very convenient now. Cobwebs had mounted to a chair, pushed the cloth aside a trifle, and was, by Mrs. Belden's directions, ready to watch, listen and study Nicolo Mazzeo.

The Son of the Stiletto came in with his air of humility, his eyes cast down and his head drooping, and at his heels followed the girl.

It was a rare thing that Kell's gravity was

disturbed, but sight of Bianca brought a smile to his sharp face.

For a "nervous, sensitive" child of ten years she was a marvel. Despite the fact that young Italian girls are prone to look older than they really are, he could almost have risked his every cent on the wager that Bianca was at least twelve, and she was a maiden of size and muscle, too.

She had a large frame which was very plump and agreeable, and her eyes were bright and her cheeks rosy with perfect health.

"She's a bu'ster!" muttered Kell. "She, nervous? Wal, I reckon not!"

And, indeed, the rôle she was to play did appear to be most absurd. But Bianca was a chip of the old block. She came in as softly as Nicolo, and her head and eyes were cast down in the same way.

"Judas 'Rascariot's darter is found!" thought Kell.

"Ah! my good man," said Mrs. Stanley, with her most benevolent air, "so you are come."

"Kind lady, I have obeyed you," replied Nicolo, servilely.

"I am glad to see you. So this is Bianca?"

"Yes, lady."

"Come here, my dear!"

Bianca advanced, hanging her head, and keeping up the old air of humility.

"Bless me! what a pretty child!" Mrs. Stanley was forced to exclaim, as she noted the girl's beautiful black hair, rosy cheeks, clear complexion and great eyes.

"Ah! but trouble has so destroyed her nerves!" exclaimed Nicolo, hastily.

"Poor dear! Do you suffer much, Bianca?"

"Dreadfully!" sighed Bianca, in a die-away voice.

"Rats!" muttered Curly Kell, behind the transom.

"System all upset, isn't it?"

"Awfully!" murmured Bianca, dolefully.

"It is a thousand pities, but you will be all right, yet. You are young, and evidently of good constitution. Naturally, you are strong."

The deluded woman took Bianca's hand. It made a marked contrast to Mrs. Stanley's. The latter had a long, thin, wrinkled hand and pipe-stem-like wrist; the Italian girl had a big, broad, plump hand, and a wrist nearly as large as a prize-fighter's.

"You shall stay with me until you are well again, my girl!" declared Mrs. Stanley, impulsively.

"You are very good, lady!" humbly declared Nicolo.

"Oh! you are very good!" humbly asserted Bianca.

And both dropped their heads lower and looked hard at the carpet.

"Hold yer hat on, 'Liza Jane!" muttered Cobwebs, at the transom, in the humor of utter disgust.

"How are all your folks this evening?" continued Mrs. Stanley, addressing Mazzeo.

"I thank you, good lady, they are a bit improved."

"I will go down and see them, myself, in a day or two."

"May all the saints bless you!"

Nicolo clasped his hands, turned his face upward and rolled his eyes, but Kell could not help thinking that if the Son of the Stiletto was looking for his patron saint he would have to look, not up but down.

"The servant will now show you to your rooms, which are connected, on the next floor. You will find clean and wholesome quarters, and, I trust, rest well."

"Bless you, lady!" fervently pronounced Nicolo.

"Bless you, lady!" sighed Bianca.

"Gammon!" muttered Curly Kell.

Mrs. Stanley rung for the servant, and then the Italians were conducted to their quarters. The Prodigy stepped down from the chair.

"Gents," he gravely observed, addressing Oakes and Keefe, "the band is about ter strike up. The Eyetalians are in the house—thar will be fun afore mornin'!"

CHAPTER X.

NICOLLO'S KNIFE.

THE work before Curly Kell, his two associates and Mrs. Belden was not by any means of trifling nature. The latter had taken a good deal of risk in introducing her confederates into the house secretly. There had always been good feeling between her and Mrs. Stanley, but if the latter discovered the secret step at any time except a crisis, she would naturally be very angry.

Mrs. Belden realized all this as time went on. She had based all upon Kell's opinion, and he frankly admitted that the aforesaid opinion was not based on anything definite.

If Nicolo Mazzeo and Bianca attempted a lawless act and were frustrated by Kell and his two aids, all would be well and good, but if no such act transpired, and Mrs. Stanley discovered their presence—then there would be a disturbance.

Realizing all this, Mrs. Belden grew nervous, and she made a visit to her confederates, after Nicolo and Bianca were conducted up-stairs, and gave them repeated injunctions to use all possible care.

In due time both the ladies of the house retired, and a little later Kell and his associates ascended to the next floor and took refuge in a closet which opened off of the hall.

Of course no risk was run in giving them the liberty of the house, for, though the Prodigy was a stranger, Oakes and Keefe were known to Mrs. Belden, and she knew they could be trusted in all ways.

The three stowed themselves away in the closet and waited as patiently as possible.

At times Kell's faith in his own judgment wavered, and he suspected that he had been rash in taking so much for granted, but he had only to recall Nicolo's record to regain courage.

The Italian was a brave who did not scruple to attempt murder to repay a real or imaginary wrong, and his present rôle of meekness and misery was very much out of place. His audacity in introducing plump, healthy Bianca as a nervous, sensitive girl was only equal to Mrs. Stanley's blind credulity in believing them, but both had acted their parts well.

If mischief was intended, the presence of friends was very fortunate for Mrs. Belden. She slept on the same floor where the Italians had been placed, while her aunt occupied the back parlor as a sleeping-room. This would have left the younger lady alone in the upper part of the house with the Italians if it were not for her secret allies.

There was a long period of inactivity, and the trio in the closet felt anything but comfortable. They heard the clock strike eleven and twelve, and another hour seemed about gone.

But their patience was not to go unrewarded.

Kell was at the door of the closet, with that obstacle pushed back far enough to give him a chance to listen. He had used his keen young ears well, but heard not a sound to warn him of any one moving until there was the slightest possible rustle in the hall near him, and looking out, he saw a dark figure.

It passed his hiding-place and paused in front of Mrs. Belden's door.

"The Eytalian, b'jinks!"

The thought passed through Kell's mind quickly, but it was intuition, not certainty; he could see nothing clearly, and the prowler might have been Italian or African; white, black or red.

The latter had come to a stop. Standing by Mrs. Belden's door, he stood like a statue and listened carefully. Minutes passed before he changed his position. When he did, he raised his arms and began to fumble about the key-hole.

Kell at once suspected an intention of picking the lock, but Nicolo had a better way than that. Slowly, cautiously, almost noiselessly, he introduced a key, and then turned the bolt back with a steady hand and no betraying sound.

The way to Mrs. Belden's room was open!

Kell nudged his confederates. He was in high glee at seeing his suspicions thus confirmed; Nicolo stood branded as a law-breaker, if nothing more.

The time was not come to disturb him, however; it had been Mrs. Belden's request that they should delay action until the fellow had betrayed the object of his efforts.

He next left the door and went to the further end of the hall, but speedily returned with Bianca in charge. Not a word passed between them, but she seemed to know just what to do, and did it with the coolness and readiness of one old in crime. She took her place by the door, and Nicolo safely turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Once more he listened; then he entered noiselessly.

Kell was in a dilemma. Although Mrs. Belden had promised to remain awake, so that she would be able to appear on the scene at once in case of alarm, there was a possibility that she had fallen asleep. In any case, the Prodigy wished to be near enough to foil any murderous attempt on Nicolo's part, and therestood Bianca in the way.

Mike Keefe comprehended the dilemma.

"L'ave her ter me!" he whispered, and left the closet before Cobwebs could stop him.

The latter was alarmed. Keefe was a large man, and accustomed to hard labor, and such persons are not usually light-footed. Mike, however, surprised his ally; a cat could hardly have moved more softly than he.

Having previously had a good look at the robust Italian girl, Keefe knew that he had no mean task ahead of him, but he thought he could manage it. He reached her side unseen and unheard, and promptly closed one hand over her mouth, preventing any outcry, while with the other arm he lifted her clear of the floor.

"Did ye iver see a rabbit jump whin he got a charge ave shot in him?" was the question the honest Irishman was accustomed to ask, afterward, when trying to explain Bianca's efforts. She did "jump," and she struggled furiously in his arms. Strong as he was, he found it no small task to hold her, but his muscles were hard, and he won the day. As her feet were clear of the floor, all betraying sound was prevented.

Kell hastened to take her vacated place by the door.

He had barely done this when a narrow band of light flashed out in the darkness at the other side of the room.

Nicolo was using a dark-lantern.

The light was turned in various directions until he finally located a big, old-fashioned desk. Upon this he set the lantern, and then opened the unlocked drawer.

Kell was curious to know what this meant. Mrs. Belden had avowed that neither money nor other valuables were in the house, but the Italian evidently was of different opinion, and knew just where to look for what he wanted.

He began to fumble among the papers.

There were but a few in the desk, and, after discarding several that he came upon first, he seized upon a compact package, gave the contents brief examination by the light of his lantern, and then thrust them into his pocket.

He reclosed the desk, but his hour of success was over.

There was a sudden sound by the bed, and then the gas leaped up fully and the whole room was in strong light.

Nicolo turned abruptly.

He stood face to face with Mrs. Belden.

She stretched out one hand toward him dramatically, and, in a voice tremulous with excitement, exclaimed:

"You thief! you think you are going to take your plunder to those who sent you, but you will not go unless it be over my lifeless body!"

Nicolo was silent and motionless for a moment, not so much because he was discovered, but because her manner was so striking that it appealed even to his low and evil nature, and beat down his will-power.

But the influence soon passed, and he revealed his real nature like a flash.

Out from his coat he jerked a knife with a long and glittering blade, and sprung toward Mrs. Belden. She had been brave the moment before, but her courage went out like a light. Nicolo's face was a revelation, with its utter ferocity and fiendishness, and she was rendered incapable of motion.

She saw her life in peril, but could not move.

Fortunately for her, there was one there less affected. Curly Kell had armed himself with part of a broom-handle, and he sprung to meet the Son of the Stiletto. Both struck at about the same time. Kell's aim was good; his club fell upon Nicolo's arm and the knife went spinning away, but Mrs. Belden had been saved by a narrow chance.

A long gash in her dress showed how near she had been to death, and the futile stroke of the knife would have been fatal had not the Prodigy's blow diverted the steel from its course somewhat.

Sim Oakes was at Kell's heels, and he had no disposition to be idle then. He grappled with the Italian, and, after a brief struggle, bore him to the floor. Mrs. Belden, though weak and trembling, had recovered her presence of mind, and she brought a long, slender rope, once used to cord her trunk, and the Son of the Stiletto was bound and rendered helpless.

"You murderin' hound!" Oakes exclaimed, "you ought ter be hung with the rope, not tied!"

Nicolo remained silent, but, looking at his right hand, moved the fingers of that hand slightly. Kell's chance blow had struck in such a way that Nicolo's arm had been paralyzed

temporarily, and it was this fact which had enabled them to overpower him so easily.

He was a desperate fighter, and Sim Oakes, strong as he was, could never have overcome him alone.

"Take the papers from his pocket!" Mrs. Belden directed.

Sim obeyed, and the lady put them in the bosom of her dress.

"Your errand here is revealed," he added, addressing Nicolo.

The Son of the Stiletto rolled his dark eyes, but made no reply.

"Should say murder was his errand," observed Sim, looking at the knife.

Mike Keefe entered the room, bearing Bianca in his arms.

"She's fainted!" he explained.

Sure enough, the girl seemed to have lost consciousness. She hung a limp weight upon him, and, as that weight was no trifle, he dropped her on the bed with more haste than ceremony.

"Swooned as nice an' 'asy as if she was wan ave dhe belles ave Fift' Avenoo," he added.

Little attention was bestowed upon Bianca. All looked at Nicolo, and Oakes was very frank in expressing his opinion.

"As murderous-lookin' a reptyle as I ever saw!" he declared.

"American," remarked the Son of the Stiletto, turning his gaze upon Oakes, "I will see you again."

"You see me now, don't yer?"

"I am a prisoner, now."

"You'll remain one."

"Wrong! I shall escape!"

"Not from *them* ropes."

"I shall be free some day. It may be years hence, but the day will come. I shall live when you are dead. I am not to die like an insect of a summer—you are! Look you, American, I am an Italian dog, to-night. In the future you shall see what you shall see. Beware the teeth of the dog! American, you are doomed! I say you shall die, and die you shall. Do not look forward to my return from a prison to which you may send me. Death never waits for his victim. My friends are Death's agents. You are doomed! The son of Italy, whom you call a dog, will live to see the thistles and wormwood grow over your grave!"

CHAPTER XI.

A TRICK, AND THE RESULT.

THOSE who listened to Nicolo Mazzeo had never before had any comprehension of how much could be expressed in words. The Son of the Stiletto did not raise his voice, or rant, or in any way grow dramatic intentionally, but his quiet utterance was so suggestive, and the light in his eyes so malignant, that, every one of his captors shivered.

It was not hard for Curly to understand why the band selected Nicolo for desperate deeds.

Sim Oakes, brave and strong as he was, changed color and applied no more severe terms to the prisoner.

After a short pause Mrs. Belden went a step nearer to the bound man.

"Where is he who sent you here?" she asked.

"Nobody sent me."

"It is useless to deny it."

"Nobody sent me," calmly reiterated the Italian.

"Do you mean to say you are ignorant of the value of the papers you tried to steal?"

"I have nothing to say."

"It is useless to deny it."

"I deny nothing."

A machine could not have been more impassive than the prisoner, and it was plain that he was no ordinary man, criminal that he was.

"Better let me go fur a p'leeceman," suggested Cobwebs.

"Wait one moment."

Mrs. Belden kept her gaze riveted upon Nicolo, and her expression was eloquent. There was much in it that Kell could not read, but he realized that there was something back of all this that she partly knew and partly guessed at.

"Sir," she continued, earnestly, addressing the Italian, "I presume that money is of some value to you. You came here because there was money to be made. Well, you can double your earnings by changing employers. You have failed to get the papers, and your pay cannot be large. On the other hand, I will reward you well if you will help me. Let us forget what has happened; let pity move you, and seeing me, a weak woman who has been a child of misfortune, give your aid. I will pay you well!"

Her voice had grown unsteady, but it was full of great earnestness. Evidently, it was no idle remark when she claimed to have known trouble.

Nicolo's face relaxed; his lips parted in a smile, but it was not one of an attractive nature. Rather, it was a malevolent sneer, and Cobwebs Kell thought he had never seen him look more villainous than at that moment.

"You seek to bribe, to buy me!" the audacious prisoner slowly enunciated. "You think I have a soul the price of which may be told in dollars and cents. Ah! well, that is your mistake. Let my silence give you the lie!"

The smile faded away; he became impassive again.

"Do you refuse?" faintly asked Mrs. Belden.

"I refuse!"

"But the money—"

"I despise it!"

"Then you must have some personal feeling."

The Son of the Stiletto drew himself up proudly.

"I have my honor!"

The reply was too absurd to admit of argument.

"Since you remain so strong in favor of those who sent you here," pursued Mrs. Belden, growing stronger, "I can only infer that you are one of the original gang. Perhaps you can tell where my son is?"

"I know not your son."

"I don't believe you!"

Nicolo shrugged his shoulders.

"What does it matter?"

"It matters a good deal. After years of waiting I have a clew, and it was put in my possession by you. I shall follow it with all possible zeal. The only question is, where do you see fit to stand in the matter? If you promise to tell what you know, and help me to recover my son, not only shall your visit here be overlooked, but I will pay you well in money. Refuse, and I shall have a policeman summoned at once."

"You have your privilege."

"Do you still refuse?"

"You have my words."

"Boy, go for an officer!"

Kell started, but Mrs. Belden stopped him with a gesture at the door.

"For the last time, prisoner, will you speak?"

Nicolo's impassive air suddenly vanished, and he glared at the speaker angrily.

"What would you have?" he demanded, "You do not know the way of an Italian gentleman. Listen! Honor is to me dearer than life. In my own country I was of the nobility, and the blood of the Cæsars flowed in my veins. Poverty drove me to America, but my lineage and my honor remain. Woman, tempt me not! Away! I will not listen to you. Call your police hirelings; fling me in your jails if you will; but honor seals my lips. More than this, I will not say!"

And he turned his back upon them.

"Rubbish!" muttered Kell.

Nicolo had talked nonsense of the worst kind, but even his preposterous choice of utterances could not provoke Mrs. Belden to a smile. She had grown deeply, painfully interested, and with new hopes springing in a heart that had known the hand of sorrow, was resolved to push the matter to the end.

Again she turned to Curly Kell.

"Go for the officer!" she directed.

"I'm off!"

Nicolo did not waver, and Cobwebs saw that the unwelcome alternative must be taken. He went down-stairs, unlocked the front door and went out. No policeman was in sight. He hurried away to find one, but luck was not in his favor; he had to search a good ten minutes before his eyes were gladdened by sight of the patrolman, and it took two minutes more to induce him to act.

Finally, Kell carried his point, and they went to Mrs. Stanley's house. The door opened readily to them, and they went up-stairs. The guide was somewhat surprised that no one met them, but he kept on until he reached the door of the room in which the previous scenes had occurred. Then he stopped short.

The room was vacant!

The gas burned as brightly as ever, but not a person was to be seen, and, as Kell stood in bewilderment, he became conscious of a profound silence around him.

There was nothing to show that any one else was astir in the house.

"Where be they?" the officer asked.

"You've got me, mister!"

"Be ye sure ye didn't dr'ame it all?"

"Dream it? Nary dream, b'jinks! Say, there's them cords we bound the Eyetalian with, sure pop!"

Kell picked up the rope, and found that it had been severed in several places with a knife.

"The Dago has turned the tables on 'em, somehow," the Prodigy commented, in bewilderment.

A footstep sounded at the door. He turned—Mrs. Belden was there.

"What's up?" he cried.

"The prisoner has escaped."

"How in p'izon could he do it?"

"We owe it all to Bianca's cunning and our stupidity. When you first saw the girl you said grimly that she was a 'bouncer' for a nervous girl. You saw the inconsistency of that, but none of us was sharp enough to wonder that such a girl should faint."

"Say! was she playin' 'possum?"

"Beyond doubt; her alleged swoon was a sham. Both she and her father were as cunning as the master they serve, and, when the crisis came, she saw that if she could escape being bound it would be a great point in their favor."

"An' she pretended ter swoon, an' kep' free from ropes an' strings."

"Thanks to our short-sightedness, she did. After you were gone she watched her chance and, when we all were occupied, stole to her father's side and cut his bonds. She must have had the knife secreted in the bosom of her dress."

"It's a wonder the male Eyetalian didn't carve ye all up, b'jinks!"

"He would have done so if we had attacked him. We quickly discovered that he was free, and Keefe and Oakes were brave enough in all reason, but the Italian waved his long-bladed knife and swore he would kill whoever opposed his departure."

"An' he skipped?"

"Yes. He and Bianca ran down-stairs and out of the front door, locking it behind them. That delayed us, and he made good his escape. Keefe and Oakes have gone in pursuit, but I think we shall never see him again."

"See him ag'in?" cried Kell. "You bet we shall! I'll ketch that critter, or wear my feet off clear up ter my ankles!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE ENMITY OF THE SECRET BAND.

CURLY KELL spoke with great emphasis. He had become very much interested in the case, and the crafty trick by which the Italians had made their escape mortified him. True, he was not responsible, for he had not been in the house, but it looked so clear, at last, that a girl like Bianca would not faint that he wondered at what he regarded as his own stupidity.

In this he was unjust to himself, but he would not listen to contrary arguments.

Oakes and Keefe returned and reported that they had seen no signs of Nicolo and Bianca, but they had reported the affair at the precinct police-station, and the sergeant on duty had promised to do what he could to capture them.

Mrs. Belden did not show much faith in the probable results of their aid, and she felt that one capable detective engaged under the chief inspector's advice would be worth more than the work of irregular assistants; but she dismissed the waiting patrolman graciously.

Mrs. Stanley came in looking pale and shocked.

Her niece had aroused her from sleep and told the story, and her blind, ignorant faith in her own judgment had received a severe shock. She knew that, only for Curly Kell's timely blow, the Italian's knife would have been used on Mrs. Belden with effects she shuddered to think of even then.

"I'll never help any poor person again!" she declared.

"Faith!" replied Mike Keefe, "if yez will give wid yer head, instead ave wid yer heart, yez'll be all roight."

Neither of the ladies failed to appreciate Kell's services, or to thank him accordingly, and when Mrs. Belden inquired as to his circumstances in life, she declared that she would reward him more appropriately.

"Wait until we ketch the Eyetalian," the Prodigy requested.

"Oh! I'll engage a detective at the Central Office, for that."

"Have you much faith in them fellers?"

"Why, yes."

"I ain't. The Eyetalian will hide in the Sixt' Ward, an' I'm knowin' ter more nooks an' cornies there than any detective. I'll run him

down. Is thar more charges ag'in' him than goin' fur ye with the knife? Who did yer mean when yer said somebody sent him?"

Kell asked his question bluntly, bound to get at the facts of the case.

"You take me back into the saddest part of my life," returned Mrs. Belden, with a sigh. "I will say, briefly, that I was married ten years ago, but, after several years of happy life, my home was cruelly broken. My husband was a French political refugee. He was the son of a marquis, but, when his father died, he was not only deprived of his title and estate, but arrested for treason."

"There was some foundation, perhaps, for the charge, for he was of a liberal turn of mind, and had often acted, as well as spoken, against the French Government. After awhile he escaped from prison and came to this country."

"He had previously belonged to a secret organization hostile to the Government of France, but just before his arrest he had learned enough of its intentions to condemn and forsake it. The leaders contemplated wholesale murder of men of noble blood, not alone in France, but in Italy, Germany and Russia, and my husband, patriot though he was, could not stoop to be an assassin."

"Thus it was that when he left France he ceased to have any connection with them, though he never handed in his resignation, for that was out of the question—once a member, always a member until death, was the rule of the League."

"We were married soon after my husband came to America, and for a time all went well, but he finally heard a rumor which startled him."

"At the time of his escape one of their leaders, who was a man much liked, and had been in hiding from the Government, was captured. My husband had no connection with the affair at all, but it seems he was suspected of it."

"The council of the League met; he was tried and condemned to die."

"When he heard this he was alarmed, but he laid his hopes on the chance that none of his old colleagues knew where he was. We had lived quietly at all times; we now lived a life almost hermit-like, and he rarely went out at night. But fear of the League haunted him always; he even dreamed of them at night, and would start out of slumber with a startled cry."

"One day he came home pale and trembling. I asked the cause, and he answered:

"I have seen a Son of the Stiletto!"

"I knew what that meant. It was the chosen few who always carried out the death-sentences when the Supreme Council had pronounced doom upon an unfortunate."

"Whether the Son of the Stiletto had seen him, in return, my husband did not know, but the encounter added to his fear. Naturally nervous, he knew the way of those dreadful men too well to rest in peace."

"Shortly after he suddenly disappeared. Let me pass lightly over it. His body was found in the river, unrecognizable except for the clothing he wore. To this day I do not know how he died. The coroner said by accidental drowning; I often think of the Sons of the Stiletto and shiver."

"We had one child, a boy. Soon after his father disappeared, he went, too—how, and where, I never knew. I spent thousands of dollars trying to find him, and employed the best detective skill in vain."

"Years have passed. I have never wholly ceased my efforts, but hope died long ago. This night a feeble ray of hope has been given me. The papers which the Italian tried to get refer to my husband's estate in France, giving proof of his identity, and so forth. Now, why should any one want to steal them, unless my son is alive, and some other heir fears he may get the property?"

Curly Kell had been listening breathlessly.

"Was yer husband's name Belden?" he asked.

"It was the name he assumed when he came to America."

"W'ot was his own name?"

"Jean Beauclaire."

"An' yer boy's name?"

"Vincent."

"Great cats!"

"You seem surprised. Surely, you have not heard of him?" Mrs. Belden asked, eagerly.

"Say, how d'ye know yer husband was drowned? Wasn't thar no proof but the clo'se?"

"No."

"Did that satisfy you?"

"At times I had doubts—but, surely, you don't mean— What do you mean?"

The lady had grown agitated, and Curly Kell nodded sharply.

"Mum, prepare fur ter hear news!" he directed.

"Good or bad?"

"Mostly good, but open ter doubts."

"What is it? Speak out, at once!"

"I seen your son an' your husband, both, last night."

The statement was out, but Kell was rather alarmed when he saw how forcibly it fell upon Mrs. Belden. Her face grew paler, and he was afraid of ill consequences.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Mrs. Stanley.

"Leastways, it was a man named Jean Beauclaire, an' a kid named Vincent."

"Where? where?" cried Mrs. Belden.

"At the Happy Haven. You've heard part o' the story, but I'll tell the rest."

Kell then proceeded to give a fresh account of the trouble at the lodging-house. Making no unnecessary words, he presented the case in plain language, and the facts were soon before his hearers.

"Describe him!" Mrs. Belden excitedly directed, referring to Jean Beauclaire.

Kell obeyed, and then the lady drew a deep breath.

"It is he!" she declared. "My husband—alive! How was I so mistaken? And where has he been all these years? Yes; it is he, and still pursued by the Sons of the Stiletto. Merciful Heaven! does their malignant hatred know no bounds? They will kill him yet!"

"Not ef I kin help it!" asserted Kell, smiting his knee with his brown hand.

"What can you do?—what can we do? We are weak, and the Sons of the Stiletto are strong."

"Don't make no difference!" returned the Prodigy, stoutly. "They kin creep an' crawl all they wish, but we'll beat 'em out. Ter-morrer I'm goin' ter hunt the gang down!"

CHAPTER XIII.

COBWEBS'S SINGULAR DISCOVERY.

EARLY the next morning, Curly Kell was at the Happy Haven lodging-house. Mahalaleel Tubbs was just getting in motion, but the lodgers had not gone out.

"All quiet?" Kell asked.

"Yes," Mahalaleel replied.

"Any o' my last night's circus-actors sleepin' with us ag'in?"

"Guess not. Ain't seen ncbody ter answer the description yer give."

"I'm sorry fur that."

"Oh! you'll never see them ag'in."

"Yes, I shall!" Cobwebs declared. "I've got interested in that crowd, an' I'm goin' ter see 'em ag'in ef I hunt New York all over. I've got the hist'ry of Jean Beauclaire and the Eye-talians pooty straight. The woman, Madame Lapierre, an' that queer Monk Merry, ain't on my list, but I guess they're only schemers. I's in hopes they'd come back, but as they ain't come, I'm goin' ter find 'em."

"Jehiel, I've seen a heap o' experience in this world," remarked Mahalaleel, gravely and wisely, "an' I give yer the result on't in these here few words: Never meddle with what don't consarn you! You'll pick up more trouble o' your own at yer toes than you kin throw off at yer heels!"

And Mr. Tubbs went to a shelf, lighted his pipe, and sat down to enjoy the peaceful smoke of a man whose mind was free from care and stored with knowledge.

Kell did not scorn this well-meant advice, for, having an old head upon his young shoulders, he was well aware that his employer had talked common sense, but he was too much interested in Jean Beauclaire's case to let it drop.

Risky the work certainly was, but he was determined to go on with it and see what he could learn.

He remained at the Happy Haven until he saw the night's patrons go away, and then, having made sure that none of them interested him, he went out into the street to begin his search.

Where was he to look? In the whole country there was no spot so well adapted for a hiding-place as the great city on Manhattan Island, and he was vaguely conscious of the fact. With many streets and more houses to look to, it would be no small affair to run them down.

That Merry and Nicolo would be in some district of poverty was certain, and it seemed probable that the latter would remain in the Italian quarter. That was all he had to go by.

He wandered down to the Five Points, and, standing by Paradise Park, watched the passers-by thoughtfully. The House of Industry and the Mission reared their friendly walls on either side of him, but, after a short pause, he walked toward the east.

In this section he lingered for some time, trying to see one of the Italians who had been at the Happy Haven, but nothing of the kind happened, and he wandered on up Mulberry street.

"Guess I've tackled a pooty large job," he confessed, half-audibly. "All o' them snakes is likely ter stay in their dens, an' I presoom I shall wear my patent-leathers all out in a vain tramp."

He looked down at his coarse, dilapidated shoes, but his attention was suddenly diverted.

"Here, young feller, make yerself useful!"

It was a sharp voice, almost at Kell's elbow, and he looked up and saw a woman who was noticeable for three things—her unusual size, a big market-basket and a stout cane.

"Ketch on ter this basket!" she asked.

"Want me ter carry it?" he inquired.

"I do, that. I'm subjack ter shootin' roomatiz. It's a-shootin' now, an' I'm so crippled that I can't hardly crawl, an' we must hev some 'taters an' cabbijes fur dinner."

Kell was accommodating, and he took the basket and moved along by the woman's side. Besides being fleshy she was jolly, dirty, and, as she had claimed, very lame.

She limped painfully as she went, and made the cane bend under her hand until it threatened to become a hoop.

When her home finally was reached she pushed the door open.

"Ef you want ter earn fifteen cents," she added, "I'll give ye that much ter help me about dinner. There's a heap o' runnin' ter be done that I don't feel like doin'."

Kell was about to answer that he was not in that line of business, but the words did not pass his lips.

He happened to look up to the head of the stairs, and saw a small boy standing there, looking down. A moment later a hand clasped the boy's arm and drew him back, but, though the upper hall was far from being in strong light, Kell had seen enough to give him a start.

Unless his eyes deceived him greatly, the boy was Vincent Beauclaire!

"I won't work ye too hard," pursued the woman, fearing that Kell's silence foreboded refusal.

The Prodigy rallied.

"I'm allays willin' ter help a lame dog over the fence—meanin' no personal 'lusion to you, mum—an' the fifteen cents is a temptation I can't stan'. I'll engage with ye, mum. I s'pose my 'keep' is included, ain't it?"

The wily speaker was as grave as if his only thought was of the bargain—and Mrs. Pride—such proved to be her name—unsuspiciously replied that his "keep" was included.

Operations were begun at once. Mrs. Pride kept a boarding-house, and did not seem to be the worst person in the world, but she had an eye to dollars and cents, and when Kell had seen a sample of her way of doing business he was prepared to believe that she could be hired to infringe upon all minor laws.

He helped her readily and briskly, and the completion of dinner preparation drew near apace, but his heart was not in the work. He was all the while thinking about the boy upstairs, and many were the expedients he considered with a view to going up there.

Luck was with him, however, and he did not have to invent any way of his own. Mrs. Pride finally collected a quantity of eatables on a waiter.

"You won't be needed here for twenty minutes," she observed, "and you kin take this upstairs to some private boarders, an' stay until they have eat. Then come down an' help me wait on the table."

"All right, mum."

"The room is on the third floor, back. You can't miss it. Jest rap on the door, an' they'll open it."

"All right; I'll 'tend to it."

Kell was calm and phlegmatic outwardly, but, really, he was exulting over his good fortune. He was bound to have a good look at the boy, and see whether it was Vincent, before he rejoined Mrs. Pride.

He took the waiter and went up the first flight of stairs. It was at that point he had seen the boy, and he looked about eagerly, but no boy was visible. Every door on that floor was open; every room was unoccupied at that time.

He kept on his journey, and went to the next floor.

It was not hard to locate the room to which he had been directed, and he was about to knock, when he noticed that the door was fastened on the outside by means of a strong hook and catch.

This was something wholly out of Kell's line of previous experience, but after a pause, he knocked on the panel. There was no answer, and no sound from within.

Certain ideas had been struggling in the Prodigy's mind, and after a brief delay, he quietly raised the hook and opened the door. It had not been locked, and a shattered part of the outer rim told why. The hook had been resorted to in lieu of anything better.

The room was not in strong light, wooden blinds covering the lower half of the windows, but it was enough for Kell's purpose. His first impression was that no one was there to eat the food, but second glance showed that he was mistaken.

In one corner a boy lay upon a mattress, his head resting upon his hand, fast asleep.

Quickly Kell advanced, and his spirits rose as he saw that it was, indeed, the same boy he had seen at the Happy Haven. It flashed upon the Prodigy that Mrs. Pride had expected some one to be with Vincent, but that the watcher had gone out unknown to her.

A chance was vouchsafed which he did not fail to improve. He hastened to rouse Vincent, who started up, rubbing his heavy eyes.

"Hello, little 'un!" greeted Kell, cheerfully.

"How's things?"

"Oh, you've brought dinner," observed Vincent.

"Never mind dinner now. Is thar a man takes keer o' you?"

"Yes; but he's gone out now."

The boy put his hand down to his waist and a chain rattled.

"He fastened me," added Vincent, mournfully.

"How's that?"

Kell bent lower, and saw with no little indignation that the small boy was actually chained to the wall. He was not well enough informed to recognize in this a relic of old-times cruelty, but he did see that they were determined to hold the prisoner at all hazards.

"Guess you don't like it?" he returned, inquiringly.

"I can't help myself."

"Wot's yer name?"

"Vincent."

"What's t'other name?"

"I think it's Beauclaire, but Monk Merry says my name is George Washington Franklin, an' he won't let me give any other name. You won't tell on me, will you?"

"Bet yer life, I won't! Got a father an' mother?"

"I don't know. I used to have, but Monk took me away, and I don't know where they are."

"Wot was her name?"

"I can't remember, it was so long ago, and I was so young. I remember the names Stanley and Belden, and it seems to me my mother was sometimes called Belden, but I don't see why."

Vincent was perplexed, but he had said enough to make all clear to Kell.

"What's Monk Merry got ter do with yer, anyhow?"

"I think he stole me," returned Vincent, in a hushed voice, "but don't you tell him I said so."

"Nary tell! Say, would you like ter go back ter yer mother?"

"Do you know where she is?" cried Vincent, quickly.

"Yes."

"Take me to her! Take me away from here! I am afraid of Monk Merry. I don't know why he keeps me, nor what he means to do with me, but I am afraid!"

"I'll yank that chain out in a jiffy—ef I can."

Kell set down the waiter and turned to his task, but he soon saw that he had not undertaken any small job. The chain was not larger than his thumb, but it was very strong, and the fastening in the wall was firm. He braced himself and pulled with all his strength, but in vain. It soon became evident that he must have either the key or some metal instrument by which he could force the lock.

"I'll go an' git it," he promised. "We want ter git out o' here before Monk Merry shows up, or there will be the tallest kind of a racket. He would be scared, anyhow, ter know a casual stranger had been in an' got on ter his chainin'-up game, an', as 'tis, he has only ter git his eagle-eye on me an' he will recognize my optikel."

visage. Yes, sir; we want ter skip afore Monk comes around."

"What can we do?"

Vincent had grown nervous, as was natural, and was eager to get away.

"I'll go down-stairs an' see ef I kin git a chisel, or some sech implement, ter bu'st yer bonds. I hope the old lady will give me plenty o' movin'-room."

The Prodigy shook his head as he meditated on the small probability that he would be allowed to hunt around, get what he wanted and then use it; but, as he had no choice in the matter, he made haste to say a few cheerful words to Vincent and started out of the room.

He opened the door, and stood face to face with a man who was just coming in.

It was Monk Merry!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CASE GROWS CRITICAL.

COBWEBS'S first impression was that all was lost at one step. There was no especial reason why Monk should consider the boy he had seen at the Happy Haven an enemy, except that events had been so troubled there that any one would be set thinking; but it was a sore disappointment to see the kidnapper back on the scene.

Monk, however, at once boiled over with good humor.

"Hullo! Hop-o'-my-thumb, be you the kid w'ot has brought my dinner?" he boisterously asked.

"I'm the kid," Kell confessed.

"Bully fur you! You're a good one! You feel fur the woes of a hungry man, an' is willin' ter give him a lift in the right d'recktion. A feller who don't feel fur my stomach ain't my frien'. I feel fur my stomach, an' I've been givin' it a show. Take somethin'?"

The speaker extended a pint flask, and Kell saw that he had been proceeding according to his own advice, and had "taken something" to an extreme. In a word, Monk was carrying more whisky than was to be seen in the bottle.

"I ain't dry," Kell replied.

"But you may be."

"Guess not."

"Wal, I'll hev all the more, then. Come in, my fair hummin'-bird o' the South Pole! The ol' lady said you was ter wait until I swallowed my feed. Wal, I'm erbout ter swaller. K'min'!"

The Prodigy decided to accept this invitation and see what would come of it. Monk staggered across the room and seized upon the waiter.

"Hash enough fur both on us, George Washington, an' we'll fall to. You ought ter be grateful ter me fur feedin' you so sumptuous. You be grateful, ain't yer?"

"Yes," replied Vincent, faintly.

"That's right; always be beholden ter your benefactors, or yer Monk Merryfactors. Stuff in the eatables, George Washington, an' le's be happy!"

The kidnapper was in a mood unusually contented and jovial, and he fell to eating with relish. His gaze soon wandered to Kell.

"You're an uncommon boy," he observed.

"Be I?"

"Yes. If I's ter make jack-knives, I'd pattern 'em after you. You're amazin' thin. Them legs o' yours would make good flag-staffs."

"They're stout, though."

"They don't need ter be. A sparrer's legs would Kerry that body o' yours. You look sing'larly like another boy I've seen some time."

Monk was drifting toward a dangerous subject, and cunning Kell hastened to avert possible trouble.

"I hope I'll grow up ter hev as stout an' noble a figger as you hev got," he asserted.

Mr. Merry's pride was touched, and he not only added to the compliment to himself, in a long dissertation, but conceived a very good opinion of Curly Kell. He did not recognize the latter—a fact due, perhaps, to his semi-inebriated condition.

Cobwebs was not at ease. Here was the lost Vincent before his eyes, but he could not help him. He thought of going out to notify a policeman, but was wise enough to know that he would have Merry, Mrs. Pride, and, perhaps, a dozen other persons, to deny any story he might tell an officer.

Vincent's own hopes were in a very unsettled state, and only Monk's repeated injunctions induced him to eat at all. He stole sly looks at Kell which were full of entreaty, but the latter could neither give nor feel encouragement.

Just as Monk was finishing his dinner, a shuffling on the stairs and several lugubrious groans announced that Mrs. Pride was coming up. Why she had defied the rheumatism was not

clear, but Monk took it for granted that he was the cause of it.

"She's afraid I'll eat up the dishes!" he growled. "Take 'em out, youngster."

Cobwebs saw no way except to obey, and he took the waiter and pushed open the door. As he did so he had a view of Mrs. Pride still toiling up, with two men at her back, and Kell had another striking surprise.

The foremost man was Nicolo Mazzeo!

Quickly the Prodigy stepped back and closed the door.

"What's up?" Merry asked, stupidly.

"She's got men with her, an' I guess I won't introod."

Even then Kell's fertile mind found an excuse, but he was somewhat worried. Had he been entrapped? Nicolo must regard him with bitter hatred, and would lose no chance to get him out of the way. Had Mrs. Pride been a decoy? Or was it only chance that had sent the Italian there?

He expected to see the door opened, but such was not the case. As the party reached the top of the stairs, Nicolo's well-remembered voice sounded:

"This part of the house does not suit me. We will take the room below."

"You'll like it, sir," declared Mrs. Pride.

"Three dollars a week, you say?"

"That's the reg'lar price, but it's five with the extras. Of course I run a risk by takin' in folks as you say the man is comin'. I keeps a good, respectable house, an' the perleece knows it an' lets me alone."

"Be at ease. We will pay what is right. Name your price."

"How long is it for?"

"We don't know. Possibly several months."

"I'll say six dollars a week, with a discount fur every week o' one dollar ef you stay three months."

"That's all right. We'll have our man here by four o'clock. I noticed an alley at the south side of the house. We shall bring the man in a hack. We want to drive into the alley and hustle him in at the side door. Will you see that it is open for immediate entrance, so that there need be no staring, and no disturbance?"

"You bet! I'm as anxious for that as you be."

"Then it is settled. We'll take the room."

"How old is your man?"

"Oh! forty or fifty."

"Is he an Italian?"

"No, though he's a foreigner. But that don't make any difference; our money is good, whether he is a Greek or a Laplander."

Nicolo spoke with some annoyance, and Mrs. Pride hastened to reassure him. She said a few consoling words, and then the party went down-stairs.

Curly Kell had stood just inside the door and listened to every word. Their talk proved to be of rare interest. Anything that concerned Nicolo naturally would be of interest, but he fixed Kell's attention at once by speaking of the man whose name he had not given. A foreigner, aged between forty and fifty years, was to be brought there in a carriage and "hustled" into the old house as secretly as possible.

"What did it mean?"

"I'll bet a jew's-harp they've got Jean Beauclaire in quod!" muttered the Prodigy.

"What's that?" asked Monk Merry, rousing from a state of semi-unconsciousness, and winking hard to get his heavy eyes open.

Monk was not dangerous just then, and Cobwebs knew he needed only a few minutes of quiet to sink into sound sleep. He had paid no attention to Kell's act of listening at the door.

The Prodigy waited, and Merry soon began to snore loudly. With so many points to look after, Kell hardly knew what to do first, but he decided that it would be a good idea to release Vincent, get him away, and then inform the police what Nicolo was contemplating.

"Where does he keep the key ter your chains?" the would-be rescuer inquired, nodding toward Monk and addressing Vincent.

"He put it in that vest-pocket," the smaller boy answered, indicating the pocket.

"Keep mum!"

With this injunction, Kell approached the captor and carefully insinuated one hand into his pocket. The man slept on peacefully, but the effort was not a success. The key was not in the pocket.

Kell was not to be discouraged, and he kept up the search. One pocket after another received his attention, but as he had begun so he finished; if the coveted article was on Monk's person, the searcher failed to establish the fact.

"It ain't no use," he admitted to Vincent, who had looked on breathlessly. "The only thing I kin do is ter go an' git some p'leece-men, an' the sooner I do that the better it will be."

Vincent was very nervous, but he did not dispute this verdict, and Kell left the room. Prudence did not desert him, and reaching the head of the stairs, he took a cautious look down before venturing further.

The moment he did so, he again dodged back.

"In a trap, b'jinks!" he commented.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PRODIGY CALLS FOR HELP.

THE view obtained by Curly Kell did not threaten immediate danger, but it did show that he could not walk out of the house safely in the way he had planned. Nicolo Mazzeo had taken possession of the room directly under Monk's, and he had not only left the door open, but was seated near it, where he would get the current of air, reading a newspaper.

"Trapped, b'jinks!"

Kell repeated the melancholy-voiced comment. He knew that his scheme of getting a policeman was nipped in the bud, as it were, for, knowing him as he did, and with this plot in mind, Nicolo would not allow him to pass.

He even suspected that his life would be in danger if the Son of the Stiletto should learn of his presence in the house. He had no intention of going down, but he experienced an unpleasant feeling as he reflected on the probable result of a trip made up-stairs by Mrs. Pride to learn what had become of her helper.

Cobwebs was a boy of expedients, and he determined not to let any time go to waste. He entered the front room. All was peaceful on the street; no policemen were in sight; but several boys loitering near gave strength to an idea Kell had vaguely had before.

He returned quickly. He wanted certain things, and was not long in finding them. In a drawer he found several envelopes and sheets of paper, badly soiled, and evidently left by some previous occupant of the room.

Kell had a short pencil in his pocket, and he sat down to write a letter in a hurry. His education had not kept pace with his wits, but, if his spelling was somewhat crude, he managed to use plain words.

This is what he wrote:

"MISSIS BELDEN:—

"Yore boy Vincent is hear. monk merry has Got him. he is wal, but yore best way is too moove att yonce iff you want him. nicolo Mazzeo Is Hear, Too. Git 3 or fore peelessmen and kum at yonce. Don't Delay. there is Danger. But you can win iff you hussel rite along. Don't fale in this, or We are awl Goners. Bring Plenty uv help, sure!

"Yores respectable,

"G. HILL KELLAR."

He was about to put this in the envelope when he saw that, in his haste, he had neglected to give the street and number. He added these important items, sealed the letter and addressed it to Mrs. Belden's home.

Then he opened negotiations with the boys outside by showing them the letter, a silver twenty-five cent piece he chanced to have, and by making signs of secrecy.

There are times when boys are contrary, and times when they are not. Kell had found the young fellows outside in just the mood to suit his purpose, and they informed him, by signs, that they understood and would carry the letter for the money indicated.

He flung both out; they were picked up by the boys; the latter looked at the address on the envelope, nodded and hastened away.

"Hope they won't go back on me," Kell muttered, looking after them thoughtfully. "Things is at a focus, so ter speak, an' it's the easiest thing in the world fur the game ter be won or lost, 'cordin' as the cat jumps. Wish Mrs. Belden was here now!"

It was aggravating to be so near to victory, and yet to have it wholly out of his grasp.

He went back to the head of the stairs. Nicolo was in his former position, and retreat was still out of the question. Kell returned to the rear room. Monk Merry slept on, but young Vincent looked mournful enough.

"Can you get me away?" he asked.

"My young frien'," the Prodigy answered, "you'll hev ter wait a fraction. I'm erbout as much tied up here as you be, but thar's a powerful activity in my mind. I hope fur ter set yer free."

"I'm afraid of Monk Merry."

"Been with him long?"

"A month."

"What happen?"
 "I don't know, but I've had an awful lot of trouble. I remember being with my own folks when I was young, but somebody took me away. I lived over on Avenue A until Monk Merry took me."

"What's his objick?"

"He never would tell me, but I overheard him say to a man that I was a mine of money."

"Hum!"

"I think he means to make somebody pay for me."

"I s'peck so, but he don't want ter give no receipt fur the money until he's counted it. He may not git it. We are on deck, my frien', an' liable ter upset their plans alarmin'."

Kell gave his head a sharp nod, and his air was so confident that Vincent brightened up a good deal, but the Prodigy was far from feeling as cheerful as he acted.

He wandered back into the hall and took another look at Nicolo, and then made a journey to the front room.

These natural, but useless, pilgrimages were kept up during the hours that followed, principally because Kell was nervous. The expected call from Mrs. Pride did not come, and the boy could only infer that she thought he had tired of his task and run away.

Nicolo did not remain in the hall all the time, but he kept the door of his room open, and Kell noticed that the slightest sound down-stairs brought the Italian out, after which he would peer over the balusters and listened sharply.

Kell remained a prisoner, practically, and he watched in vain for Mrs. Belden to appear. As the afternoon wore away he was forced to believe that his messengers had played him false, or that the lady did not intend to answer the summons.

After a long sleep Monk Merry awoke. He rubbed his discolored eyes and looked around stupidly. Kell was in the front room, and Monk did not remember meeting him there, at all, so Vincent escaped questioning.

Monk had an unnatural thirst upon him, and he was not long in taking steps to satisfy it. He went down the first flight of stairs, and was about to proceed further when Nicolo showed that he was duly watchful.

He suddenly dodged out into the hall, and he and Monk stood face to face. The recognition was mutual, but neither spoke at once. Monk looked troubled; the Italian was evidently as radically pleased.

"We meet!" he finally exclaimed. "Good! I am glad."

"Don't know ye, mister!" growled Monk, trying to pass.

"Wait! I would have a word with you. Where is the boy?"

He had caught Monk by the button, but the ragged man shook off his hold roughly.

"Don't know no boy, an' don't know you. Git out o' my way!"

Nicolo remained in his path, and kept his composure admirably.

"Friend, be not hasty," he urged. "I know you will not throw away two dollars to get one. There is money in the boy. You and I know it. You have him, and hope to make money, but you can do nothing alone. With me and my friends at your back, all things can, and shall, be done, and riches shall be ours. Don't reject my offer; don't reject the power that can help you. Look you! the boy is up-stairs, now. I can take him by force if I will, but I am no robber. Come into partnership with me, and we will win together."

Nicolo spoke rapidly, but with a measure of persuasion not usual to him. It was plain that he wished to convince Merry, and he had made an impression. The listener regarded him earnestly.

"Kin you do all you claim?" he asked.

"Señor, I can."

"How?"

"Come into my room and I will explain—no; let us go up-stairs. We are too near the ground floor, and somebody might listen. Has any one else a room up-stairs?"

"No, but my room ain't fit fur company—"

"We will talk in the hall," returned Nicolo, his quiet smile showing that he understood Monk's clumsy evasion. "Come!"

He took Merry's arm, and led him a captive, and not wholly a willing one, to the upper hall. Curly Kell nearly closed the door of his room, and prepare to listen.

"Friend," the Italian went on, rapidly, "we must be allies; let us be frank. You know who and what the boy is."

It was not a question, but an assertion, yet Monk slowly answered:

"Yes."

"Did you ever hear of the Sons of the Stiletto?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"Es I hear it, they was a secret serciety in Europe, which worked its way into a perlitikel pie, thar, an' become the men what did secret work for the politicians, but the scheme failed, the leaders kicked out the Sons of the Stiletto; an' then the Sons give Europe the slip, came ter America, an' exist here as a body wholly separate from politics."

"Right! But," Nicolo darkly added, "those who kicked us out have paid dearly for it—how, I will not say. But if more recent attempts in Europe at political agitation and liberty had had us back of them, the result would have been very different. Enough of this; the Sons of the Stiletto now owe allegiance to no one but themselves. They number many men and women, make much money, and are all-powerful Woe unto those who incur their anger!"

"I see! I see!" Monk exclaimed. "Buterbout biz?"

"It is in my power to take the boy away from you forcibly, but you have earned a reward by getting and keeping him when he was all adrift. Join me in this plan, giving me equal proprietorship in the boy, and you shall have one thousand dollars."

Monk's eyes glittered greedily.

"An' th' band will see that we git it?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-night!"

"It's a bargain!"

Nicolo grasped the speaker's hand.

"Enough has been said. After this, work is the word. I do not hesitate to say that the boy's father will be here within two hours. Before midnight," the Son of the Stiletto darkly added, "the boy will be the only one of the family that need interest us!"

CHAPTER XVI.

BEAULCLARE ENTERS THE TRAP.

HAVING arrived at an amicable understanding, Monk and Nicolo went down-stairs and had a drink in the latter's room of liquor which the Italian had along with him.

Curly Kell felt that more of interest would be said, and tried to overhear it, but they were not where their words were audible. Neither was chance given for him to make his escape from the house.

When in the front room Kell had noticed that the wall between that and the rear room was dilapidated and cracked, and as night was close at hand, and a view of Vincent might be very important, he went back to see what the means of observation were. He found that the partition was only one of a single line of boards, and the wall-paper pasted upon it was broken in several places.

At a crisis, he believed he could burst the boards away.

This he was willing to do for Vincent's sake, though he was sensible enough to see how weak his efforts would be against the men.

Once more he went to the window and looked eagerly for Mrs. Belden, but there was no sign of her. The long-continued delay had grown wearisome and discouraging. He could only decide that his messenger had proved faithless, and that he would not see her at all.

Just as the day was waning he heard movements on the stairs which betokened the ascent of a woman, and he peered out curiously.

He had a fresh shock when he recognized the person who had given the name of Madame Lapierre.

Well aware that, at that moment, Nicolo was down-stairs and Monk in his own quarters, Kell ran to a good point of observation in the broken wall to see what would occur next.

He was treated to a dramatic tableau.

Madame Lapierre had paused at the door, and was calmly looking at Vincent and Merry. The latter had risen and was looking at her in consternation. He was speechless, and, after waiting awhile, she smiled scornfully and broke the silence:

"Perhaps you would like to run again, my dear sir!"

Monk did not change his position, or speak.

"You beat me out at the lodging-house, but only because I did not know what cards were in your hand," she added. "This time I know he is here!"

She pointed to Vincent.

"I'd like ter know," cried Monk, flushing with anger, "what business you hev ter come here?"

"My business is with you."

"I don't want to see you, an' you kin get out as soon as you please. Skip!"

Monk advanced threateningly, but stopped short when Madame Lapierre suddenly drew a revolver.

"Did you wish to see me?" she calmly asked.

Merry scowled savagely. Some women could not have frightened him with a revolver, but he made no mistake in the Frenchwoman; he knew that she had abundant nerve, and suspected that she could send a bullet straight to the mark.

"I'll have you arrested!" he stormed.

"No, you won't, that would put you in the soup, so to speak. The police would get their hands on this boy, and your case would be settled. Better be wise, and meet me as a friend."

"What do you want?"

"Possession of the boy."

"What fur?"

"To put him in a quiet retreat."

"Guess you're on the off side o' the ace."

"I certainly don't want him to go to France, and he shall not go."

"You speak pretty confident, seems ter me."

"Look you, Merry, you and I need not quarrel. I have my plans, and they are going through. The only question is, will you be dumped on the rocks entirely, or will you come in with me and share the money I am sure to make. Take your choice at once!"

Monk looked at her in uncertainty and bewilderment. He was willing to join hands with some one, in order to make money out of Vincent, for he was well aware that the case was too deep for him to handle alone, but he did not see how he was to be the ally of all these persons who were applying for a chance.

He was helped out of his dilemma when the door again opened and Nicolo came in quietly. Madame Lapierre retreated a step and raised her revolver, but the Italian smiled and spoke in a soft tone:

"Be at ease, dear lady; we are all friends here."

"How do you know we are?" she retorted.

"Because our interests are alike."

"How do you know that?"

"I have listened at the door!"

"Spy!"

Nicolo put out a deprecating hand.

"Amiable lady, do not misunderstand me," he gently returned. "Far be it from me to do what is wrong, but I have my own interests to defend. In this case, we three—you and I, and worthy Mr. Merry—all have a common aim. Why should we pull against each other?"

"Why should we pull together?" Lapierre retorted.

"Because union means success; contention means failure. There is money to be made if we manage the matter rightly, but lack of harmony will ruin all. Suppose we quarrel? What then? There will be trouble; the police will come into the case; the identity of a certain child will be established. How, then, can we make money by keeping him from sight?"

For once, Nicolo was in earnest.

His manner convinced Madame Lapierre, and after some hesitation, she consented to sit down and talk with the Son of the Stiletto.

Their voices became so low—they wished to be unheard by Vincent—that Curly Kell could distinguish nothing, nor was he disposed to stop and listen. Believing that he had a chance to leave the house, he determined to go out and notify the police at once. He went as far as the head of the stairs, and then stopped short.

The second Italian was on guard in the hall below.

Cobwebs retreated to the front room, seized paper and pencil, and hurriedly wrote these lines:

"TO THE POLICE:—There is a Murderer Skeem bein' hatched in This hous. iff the officers would save Life Let them cum at yunce. Them Who is in it is Nicolo Mazzeo, Monk merry and Maddam lapier. Proof will be Giv iff you will cum. but the riter can't git owt. Help! J. KELLAR."

So far all was well, but it was another matter to get a policeman to respond to the call. He looked up and down the street for one in vain. Twilight had come and passed; darkness was gathering, and but few persons were on the sidewalks.

For several minutes he watched for a blue-coated officer, and then, growing nervous, called to a small boy who chanced to pause below.

"Will yer take this letter to a perleeceman?"

"What fur?" was the reply.

"Because it's important."

"Ef you says so, I will."

It was an indifferent reply, but it was all Kell could hope for, and he dropped the letter. The boy picked it up lazily and sauntered away.

"He needs some ginger!" muttered Kell, discontentedly.

He was watching the receding messenger when a close carriage left the street and turned into the alley at the side of the house. Kell's blood seemed to leap in his veins—it was in that way that Nicolo had said Jean Beauclaire was to be lured to the house.

Before the Prodigy could fairly realize the situation the carriage had passed his point of view.

"Murder will be done, an' I've got ter make a break!" he decided. "Here goes!"

He ran out of the room, and, finding no one in the hall, went rapidly, but lightly, down the two flights of stairs. Before he had passed the second flight, he knew that he was not to have plain sailing.

The unknown Italian stood in front of the closed front door, grim and motionless.

Kell made a pretense of ignoring him and tried to pass, but he was caught by the shoulder and held back.

"Stay here!" the man sternly ordered.

"What fur? I want ter go out!"

There was enough of rebellion in the answer to show the Italian that danger was at hand, and he promptly bared a knife of true stiletto shape.

"Be quiet, or die!" he ordered.

At that moment there was a scuffling noise at the side of the house—the sound of a struggle—and Kell knew that Jean Beauclaire was in the trap. What would be done? Would they slay him at once, or was there still hope? If a short reprieve could be gained, all might not yet be lost.

The sounds ceased, and Nicolo entered the hall hastily.

"Ha! whom have we here?" he demanded.

"I know not, comrade. A boy."

"A boy!" cried Nicolo, a look of recognition appearing in his face. "He is an accursed spy! By my life! he has come here to hunt us down!"

CHAPTER XVII.

KELL CREATES A DIVERSION.

NICOLO drew a knife as he excitedly spoke these words, and Curly Kell turned and made a dash for the door, regardless of the second Italian's interposing form, but the latter caught the Prodigy, closed his hand over his mouth, and the prisoner had no chance to cry out.

"Bring him this way!" Nicolo directed, recovering his calmness, and putting away the knife.

The order was obeyed, and, though Kell struggled to the extent of his ability, he was soon in the rear room. He was not surprised to see Jean Beauclaire there, but was somewhat relieved to discover that he still lived.

Nicolo caught up a small rope, a portion of which had previously been used to render Jean helpless, and the Prodigy was soon bound as fast as his companion in misfortune.

Then he was dropped on the floor without ceremony.

Beauclaire remained the center of interest, but he had nothing to say. His whole manner indicated the utmost terror. His body was limp, and he could only roll his startled eyes and look beseechingly at his captors.

The latter held a whispered conference, and, in a short time, the leaders—Nicolo, Merry and Madame Lapiere—collected, as it proved, to interview Beauclaire. Kell looked on in silence. He realized his own danger, but did not abandon hope wholly. He had sent out a message—perhaps it would fall into the hands of some policeman with enough curiosity, if not confidence, to test the truth of the statements it contained.

"Prisoner," spoke Nicolo, "you are in the presence of your judges."

Beauclaire did not answer.

"Your father was a marquis in France; you might be one now, if you had been wise. You were not wise; you joined the Sons of the Stiletto, and then betrayed them."

"Nevair!" exclaimed Beauclaire, feverishly. "I knew not ze ways of ze league when I s'all have joined it, and thought it only for ze political purpose; and when I knew ze whole truth, I leave ze band. But betray it—nevair! nevair!"

"Opinions differ. We have hunted for you; we have found you."

"You persecute ze life of me!" groaned Beauclaire. "Years ago I had ze happy home, but I know ze Sons of ze Stiletto were on my track. Zat ees what drove me insane. I wandered away; I came to ze reason, years after, in an asylum; I leave zere, and hunt for my family, but find zem not."

"They thought you dead. A body was found

in the river. It could not be recognized, but it had on your clothes—so they decided. Of course it was a mistake; the clothes were like yours, but not yours. You have been the same as dead for many years."

"And my family—do zey live?" asked Beauclaire, eagerly.

"Yes."

"Where? where?"

"You will never know."

"Heart of stone!"

"More than this, another political turn of the tide in France has put your family in favor. You are being hunted for to fill the shoes of a marquis."

"I care not for ze empty honor."

"If neither you nor your son appears, the title and estate will go to your cousin, Basil."

"He can have them."

"He shall have them, but he shall pay us well to keep the real heir out of sight."

Cobwebs began to see why the birds of prey were so interested in Vincent.

"Believe me, ze estate I s'all not claim," Beauclaire quickly answered.

"Right! We shall not use you, but your son. All I need to work the game is certain papers now in your wife's hands. I bribed a servant of hers to get a duplicate key made to a certain room in the house—the front door is secured with a chain, as well as lock—and get the papers, but was defeated. I shall not fail the next time."

Beauclaire sighed.

"Do you know this woman?" continued Nicolo, pointing to Madame Lapiere.

"Only too well!"

"She was one of the band in olden days; she is still a good schemer. She knew the money that was in this case, and was working the same game. Now she and I have joined hands, as we often did in Continental days. This honest man is also my ally."

This time he pointed to Monk Merry.

"I know," replied Beauclaire, bitterly. "We wandered through ze country roads together, ragged companions in misfortune, and I told him too much."

"A feller's got ter earn a livin'," growled Monk, not without signs of shame.

"So much to make all plain, Beauclaire. Now," continued Nicolo, his voice growing hard, "we will return to the matter between you and the Sons of the Stiletto. Do you know why we have lured you here?"

The unfortunate Frenchman began to tremble again.

"I know not," he faintly replied.

"To-night you and the League settle the old score. Years ago you betrayed us—"

"Never!" cried the prisoner. "I left ze band, but I swear by ze saints zat I never lifted ze one finger against you."

"Why do you lie?"

"I speak ze truth."

"Enough of idle talk. You are doomed by the Council of the banded Sons—to-night you die!"

Beauclaire unclosed his lips to plead for mercy, but pride came to his aid and he suddenly cast off the appearance of weakness. No wonder he had broken down when hunted for years by hidden foes whose stroke might come at any moment, but he was not a craven. The doom he had so dreaded seemed certain, and he resolved to meet it like a man.

During this conversation no one had been paying any attention to Curly Kell. Regarding him as a very unimportant factor in the case now that he was tied up, he was left to himself.

This was just where they made a mistake.

The Prodigy was nothing if not plucky, and he was no sooner in bonds than he began to scheme to get out again. It was his first experience in that line, but he soon made a discovery which the others had overlooked. His wrists were much larger, proportionately, than his hands, and his first attempt to squirm out of the cords upon the former sent his hopes away up.

All the while they were talking he was at work, and at last he succeeded in drawing one of his hands out of the noose.

This done the rest was easy, and he was soon wholly free.

His first impulse was to make a dash for the street, and this he had cause to believe would be successful, but the certainty that the gang would at once fall upon Beauclaire deterred him. He surely would doom the Frenchman by going.

The decision was heroic enough for a veteran soldier, but Kell made it with modest disregard

of everything but a desire to help his fellow prisoner.

He had a pocket-knife with a big, keen blade, and this he drew and opened. Just as Nicolo was finishing his remarks the Prodigy carefully rose to his feet.

There was a general stir among the enemy which indicated that all regarded the interview as over. It was at that moment that somebody else stirred—Curly Kell.

He made a rush for Beauclaire's side, and with two quick strokes severed the bonds on the latter's hands and wrists. The Frenchman was free.

"Up!" the Prodigy cried. "It's life or death—fight yer way through!"

Every one was taken by surprise, and no one more so than Jean, but the very danger that he was in spurred him on to promptness of action unusual to him. He sprang forward and knocked down the nearest Italian, and then essayed to rush through and escape, but Nicolo's stiletto was raised for work.

One moment it looked as if nothing could save the imperiled man, but Kell was there, and keeping his eyes open.

That cunning young man lowered his head and ran between Nicolo's extended legs, and the Italian fell like a log.

But Madame Lapiere threw her arms around Beauclaire's neck, bound to frustrate his escape, and, as the first of the Sons of the Stiletto was on his feet again, ruin stared our two friends in the face.

It was a serious crisis, but of short duration. Suddenly the door was flung open, and blue-coated policemen rushed into the room. Kell saw Mrs. Belden close behind them, and flung up one hand in a wild gesture.

"Hooray!" he cried; "the under dog is on top now, b'jinks!"

The turn of the tide had come. Madame Lapiere, Monk Merry, Nicolo and the other Italian were secured, but not without a hard struggle. When it was done the foundation of the plot was utterly gone, and not a shred remained whereby the schemers could console themselves.

They were hurried away to jail, while Beauclaire, his wife and Vincent, husband, wife and child, were reunited after many years. Mrs. Belden's delay in answering the summons was due to the fact that she had been away when Kell's note arrived at the house. The Prodigy never knew what became of his second note—the one sent to the policeman.

Nicolo and his countryman were never tried for their crimes. They escaped, were pursued, took to the river in a boat, and were drowned by being upset in collision with a passing steamer.

Monk Merry received as long a sentence to Sing Sing as his abduction of Vincent would allow, while Madame Lapiere, who was an old offender, was tried for a former crime and given fifteen years at the same retreat.

The charge against Bianca was not pressed, but in less than a month she was in prison for participation in a robbery, and was convicted and sentenced.

Investigation showed that the Sons of the Stiletto, individually and as a band, were about extinct, and, on being assured that he would be in no danger, Beauclaire decided to resume his old name. After communicating with friends in France, he took his wife and child and sailed for the Continent. The political power of the day received him gladly; he resumed the title of marquis, which had been his father's; and in the years that have since elapsed he has never seen a Son of the Stiletto, or heard from them. With Nicolo's death they practically ceased to exist.

The family did not forget that their success—their victory, happiness and prosperity—all was due to one certain person, and when safe in the old home they sent a large sum of money to a prominent New York lawyer with the injunction:

"See that the boy, Jehiel Kellar, is given a chance to go to school and become a true, honest and noble American, which he surely will become if properly encouraged and helped."

It is hard for people to throw off all their peculiarities, but "Curly Kell" left Mr. Tubbs's lodging-house and went to school with a determination to succeed if possible—in any case, to do his very best.

That meant a good deal in his case, and today—But our story does not deal with his later life. Enough to say that, perhaps, you will some day happen into the Broadway store where he is doing a flourishing business as a merchant.

THE END.

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